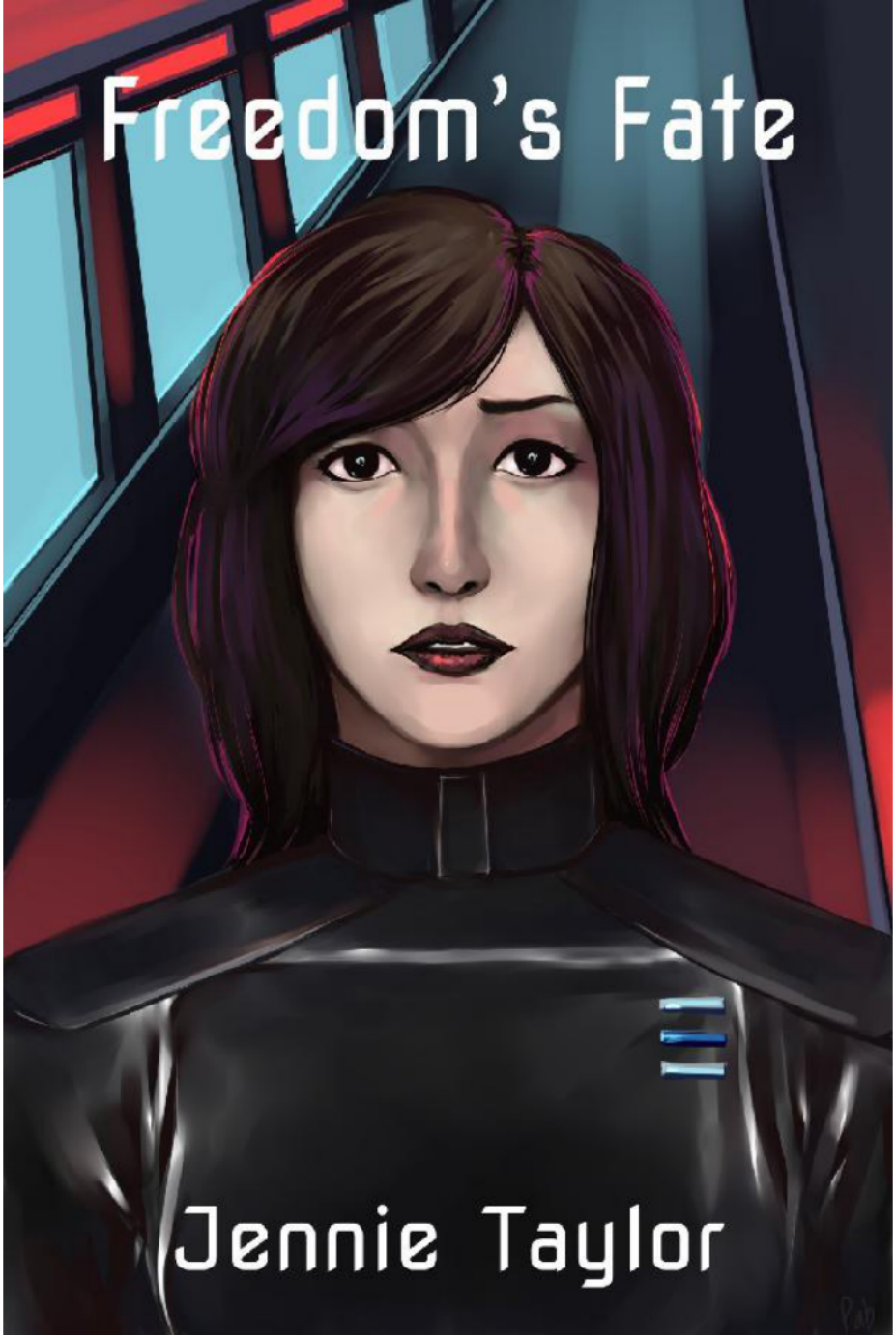

Freedom's Fate
Jennie Taylor

# Freedom's Fate

Freedom's Fate

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters and locations are either figments of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

©2017 Jennie Taylor
All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in any form, in whole or in part, without written permission from the author.

Cover by Pablo Taylor - pablot@okstate.edu

This is once again dedicated to
Maggie, who does little things every
day to make me feel special and loved.
I only wish I had some way to make her
feel as loved as I always do.
I love you, my Maggie!

## Chapter One

I didn't want to go to work, but I couldn't just sit and stare at the picture of my parents on the dresser any longer. My lack of sleep wasn't unusual for me; I didn't sleep much most nights, to the point of even needing medication for it at times.

I stretched and stood, knowing I would feel better working, better disappearing into the ship's systems. Today makes ten years since their death. It feels so very much longer.

God help me, I missed them so much.

That's stupid, of course I missed them.

Seeing their picture on my dresser brought me joy, of course, but it also reminded me of the day they died. Every single time, it reminded me.

I was five. The morning of their death I had been arguing with my mother, trying to talk her out of going to work. Her and Dad were doing a repair on an antenna outside of the ship that day, and I had a really bad feeling. But she assured me that they were the best onboard at the outdoor repairs, that they had each done dozens of jobs in the EV suits, and that it was perfectly safe.

I wasn't so sure, though.

Eventually, Mom insisted I go to school, and she promised me she would make me some cookies when she got home so they would be ready for me.

She lied.

Dad stopped in to say goodbye just before he left, and I remember his exact words that day as clearly as I remember my own name.

“Eww! Go change your wet pants, Liddy!”

I was so embarrassed! I remember wanting to explain to him, to tell him I didn’t pee myself again, that I had just splashed water when I washed my hands. I didn’t get a chance before he hurried out the door, though.

I never could figure out why he called me Liddy all the time. It’s strange, the things we remember about our parents. He always called me Liddy. I remember even telling him that it wasn’t my name, that my name was Callie, but he just kept calling me that.

Not Mom. She would always call me Eun-ji. When I was little that would confuse me so much, because people would call her that all the time. It wasn’t until later that I understood that it was her name, and that they had given me that as a middle name as well.

I always thought her name was just Mom.

So that day, that terrible and tragic day, I was in class and listening to the teacher drone on and on and on about something that I couldn’t have cared less about. Multiplication, I think. I don’t know, I was zoned out, thinking about my parents and how sure I was that something bad would happen.

When my tablet vibrated I removed it from the pocket on the front of the cutesy dress that my parents always put me in, then unfolded it. There was a message saying there was a livestream from my mother. I eagerly opened it to see her smiling face staring at me as she waved at the camera, the stars and blackness of space a backdrop behind her.

She waved.

She smiled.

She died.

As Mom stood there, her suit working hard to keep her oriented to the ship, the stars and bleakness of space behind her, I saw Dad come into view, working on the antenna behind her.

I saw him jerk to the side suddenly.

I saw the vapors from the oxygen escaping from his suit.

I saw Mom turn toward him just as he was struck by another micrometeoroid.

I saw Dad tumbling away from the ship.

I saw Mom lurch forward, then the tablet–which had been strapped to her arm–came loose and flipped end over end, flashing image, then space. Image, then space.

The broken glass of Mom's helmet, then space.

Dad's flailing body, then space.

I didn't cry. I didn't scream. I remember thinking that it couldn't be real, that I wouldn't *let it* be real. That it had only been my imagination, my *make-believe* as Mom called it.

I stood and walked to the port, triggered the outer shutter and stared out into space. I saw them there, floating away from the ship, grasping onto each other as they tried in vain to regain control of their suits and make their way back to me. I saw the looks of terror on their faces as they sucked in their last breaths.

Of course I know now that there was no way I could have seen them, they were on the opposite side of the ship from me. But five year old Callie could see it. Five year old Callie could imagine every gruesome detail of what they were going through.

I remember the teacher calling over to me to close the shutters and return to my seat. I was an obedient little girl–at least in school–and I did as she had instructed. But not before waving goodbye to my Mom and Dad one last time.

I don't remember much else from that day. I remember being scared. I remember my Mom's best friend, Bao Xiang, coming to pick me up from class a few minutes later, tears streaking down her face. And I remember feeling really, really sad.

And I never saw my parents again.

And I never got to explain the wet spot that was on my pants that morning.

I don't think I cried at all that day. I don't think I cried until two days later. And then that's all I did for twelve straight hours. They had to have Mark, the ship's doctor, give me a sedative just to get me to stop. I didn't eat for a week, and I barely slept.

And every day I stared out the port, hoping to see them coming back. Hoping they would walk in and tell me it was all a mistake, that everything was fine. That *they* were fine. I knew I'd never see them, but a small part of me thought that if I stared long enough, that if I wanted it badly enough, that if I promised God that I'd be a good girl and *really meant it* then they could come back.

Sometimes I still stare out the port, just waiting for them and making those same little girl promises.

Anyway, when my chance at command came I was going to do better–*be better*. I would never send both parents of a child outside the ship for minor repairs, leaving only their EV suits to protect them from the micrometeoroid showers that the Freedom encountered several times a year.

I would never let a child be turned into an orphan.

I would never let some other little girl grow up alone.

That's what I told myself every morning when I woke. Not that I slept every night. Many mornings came with me having no sleep at all, having spent the entire night going over and over what happened to them, trying to think of what could have been done differently, trying to think of what I could have done or said to keep them from going out that day.

I think a part of me, the little girl part that died a little that day they died, thought I could bring them back if I just came up with an answer. That if I wished it with enough intensity, I could go back in time and fix things. Make them not die.

Of course the fifteen year old Callie knew better. I did.

I took a last look at the picture of my smiling parents, trying very hard not to sink into the mire that I felt pulling me down inside. I put on a nice dress–not precisely within the rules on uniforms–and did my makeup. I tried to improve my mood by looking my best. It helps

sometimes, somewhat. As long as I avoided the ports.

I made my way to the bridge, determined to go to work as I did every day. I've always been determined to learn. To impress and move up in the ranks.

My number one goal that morning was the same as always, to work toward becoming captain one day so I could prevent the tragedy that happened to our family from happening to another. And I was getting there quicker than anyone ever had.

When I was ten the senior crew voted to make an exception to the rules that require you to be fourteen and allowed me to join the crew as a recruit. I was crewman second class by the six month mark, and crewman first class in less than a year.

At eleven they voted again to override the regs, and allowed the captain to promote me to ensign second class. You usually have to be sixteen, but I had been studying everything I could find about the ship since I was five.

Did I mention I was a determined child?

At twelve I skipped ensign first class, leaping to chief in the Command division. Milton–Captain Nelson–had to really push for that one. To make exceptions to the regulations requires a two thirds majority of the senior officers to approve it, and it took some arm twisting for him to convince them. It only took a simple majority of votes from the junior officers, which is those chief and up, to approve a promotion, but overruling regulations is only voted on by senior officers–the captain and those who are commanders in each of the four divisions.

I mired at chief for over two years. It was killing me, but I worked hard and knew more about the ship than almost everyone else by the time I was promoted–overruling the regulations again–to Lieutenant second class at fourteen, and added as a second third officer.

As of that morning, that's what I remained. My position was on the bridge, as head systems officer. The job wasn't strictly supposed to be in Command, it was usually in Engineering, but Milton insisted. I think he just wanted to keep an eye on me.

When my parents died, Milton Nelson–who was first officer at that time–became my guardian. I'm not even sure how that all happened, to be honest. I've read and researched, asked all the questions that I dare, but the best I can come up with is that he was just the next unlucky person who walked through the door, and they stuck him with me. Whatever it was, he became captain five years ago, when Captain Donaldson died. On top of moving to better quarters, it put Milton in a position to really push my career forward.

I got to the bridge and took my seat, but I could feel the eyes of everyone else on the bridge watching me. I knew the reason. I didn't need their pity! It only reminded me of my parents.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Monroe." Milton said to me. "I don't believe you're on the schedule for this morning."

"I'm not on the schedule a lot of days, Milton. It hasn't stopped me before." I replied.

It is true, I was up there almost every single day. It wasn't like it should have been a surprise to anyone. I studied every waking minute, could cite the page and number for regulations from the thousand page manual, knew every sensor and node in the entire ship, and worked my butt off to know every detail about the network onboard. I even knew that someone tried to login with an expired password in the cafeteria two minutes before.

"You should take the day off, Callie." he said softly to me.

"I don't need a day off."

"Go home."

He thought that would do any good? Did he even know me? Didn't he know I'd either just be working from there or, more likely, go over each detail that day to come up with ways it could have gone better?

"Callie," he said. I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"Don't make me go, Milton." I mumbled, working hard not to lose it.

From the corner of my eye I saw his head move up and down in a nod, and he took his hand from my shoulder.

I got into the systems then, noticing an alarming number of problems coming from sensors on the network. Specifically, the ones

connected to major systems, like the main engines. A quick double check confirmed that I had flagged these for repair, many of them over three days ago. Another quick look verified that there had been over twenty instances in the past month where I had flagged something for Engineering to repair and it being left for more than two days.

"I think I'll go check with Bao." I said, standing and stepped toward the door.

"About what?" he asked. "It's so important that you need to get out of your seat? Isn't that what comm channels are for?"

He had that half smile smirk on his face that he gets sometimes when he is teasing me. For an older guy approaching seventy, he had a quick wit, and he often teased me for avoiding face to face contact with the crew whenever I could.

"We're having a lot of problems with sensors not being repaired. It's not like Bao, usually she's on top of her people better than this."

"Yes, *Commander Xiang* usually trains her people well and enforces a policy of making sure the Freedom is a well maintained ship."

That's another thing he teased me about, calling the senior officers by their first names. Bao Xiang was my mother's best friend when I was born, and she was Aunt Bao before I even knew what a commander was, let alone before she had risen to that rank. I had gotten to know the other senior officers when I was a scared and lonely five year old following Milton everywhere on the ship, afraid to be alone. I've always called them by their first names.

Engineering was on deck six, two hundred and seventy meters aft and five levels down from the bridge on our four hundred meter ship. When I entered I found a mess. This was so unlike Bao. She liked things clean and tidy. A well ordered workplace makes for a well ordered crew, which makes for a well ordered ship. That was her motto.

I didn't see her, though. I expected her to be out there, yelling at people, screaming at them for not doing their work the way they should. At least I thought she should be out doing that, since things were definitely not going well in Engineering right then.

Instead I saw crewmember after crewmember slaving away to fix things that are not high priority while the higher priority items remain untouched.

The first three crewmember I came across–two ensigns and a chief–walked right past me when I asked where Bao was.

"Looking for Commanded Xiang, ma'am?" Chief Logan finally asked from fifteen meters away. The look on his face makes it rather obvious it wasn't *his* crew who is incompetent and not doing their jobs. "She took a break for breakfast, Miss Monroe. She should be back soon, if you want to wait in her office for her."

"Thank you, Chief." I told him.

Bao's office was a mess. At least for Bao. There were papers all over her desk. I moved to the backside of the desk and sat in her chair, looking down at the pile. Many of them were written orders, and some were reprimands for some of Bao's crew. I checked her computer to verify that there wasn't a problem down here, that they actually could access the log where I marked things for repair. There didn't seem to be any problems, as far as I could see.

"Having fun back there, kiddo?" Bao asked, entering the room.

Her short black hair was messy, not her usual orderly military cut. Instead it was spiky and uncombed. Her clothing looked as if it could have been worn three days in a row, and it had stains and wrinkles.

This couldn't really be Bao. Someone had kidnapped her and replaced her with a bad lookalike. Maybe not, but… wow, she was a mess.

"Just checking to see if you got my notifications." I told her.

"Oh I got 'em. Now if I can just get my damn night crews to get off their lazy asses and do something, I could probably have that list completed."

"Problems with personnel?" I asked her.

"Flippin' attic dwellers." she muttered. "What brings you down here? And do you mind giving my chair back?"

"Sorry, didn't mean to steal your chair." I said, standing up quickly.

"You're not sorry! Kiddo, you've been stealing my chair since you could crawl into it." She moved to her seat and sat. "And yes,

personnel problems would be an understatement."

"I see. So, the papers?" I asked. "It's not like you to waste resources on notes that could be in the computer."

"Got that right." she said. "Yes, well, there are some things I'd just as soon keep quiet right now. In fact, I shouldn't have left them out where anyone could see them."

She made a show of gathering the papers up into a neat pile, aligning the edges with the sides of the desk. I waited patiently, not wanting to get in her way when she was in an organizing mood. I've done that before; it did not go well.

"Now, what can I do for you?" she asked, looking up and sipping from her coffee.

"Just wondering about the sensors that are down."

"Huh! I can't get the damn chiefs to do anything overnight. My day crews have been doing their best, but of all my chiefs I think I really can only trust two of them, Logan and Wilson, and they can't make up for the rest of them by themselves. Logan is a great guy, and Anna is the damndest thing I ever saw–that girl is snap bang! She's been at it three months and may very well be the best chief I've ever had–but they can't do the work of six crews."

"What's the problem with the rest?" I asked, trying hard to stay focused on the task and not let the memory of the last night's dream intrude.

"They suck!" she said quickly. "No, that's too kind. They are beyond sucking. Grace and Abner, especially. Those two keep marking things done that have not even been looked at, let alone done."

We were on a giant ship in space, and our only chance at rescue came from our transport ship, the Atlantic Gale. Kind of made me think about how dangerous Abner and Grace really were.

"You look so much like Eun-ji." Bao told me, apropos of nothing.

"Not even remotely, but thank you." I told her.

"You have her smile, her nose, her eyes."

My mom was an average height woman with a Korean family. She was maybe five three, but muscular, and had black hair that was always in a short bob. I'm just over five foot tall, half Scottish, have brown hair down past my shoulders, and am thin and non-athletic. To be honest, I've always thought Bao looked more like my mother than I did. Maybe they are distant cousins or something. Point is, I look

*nothing* like my mother did.

"So you didn't just come down here to listen to me bitch about my crew. What else is up?"

"Just worried, that's all."

"Okay, kiddo. If you say so."

"I better get back to the bridge."

"Oh, congratulations on your promotion, by the way."

I must have looked confused, because I was. That was the first I had heard of a promotion. I wasn't going to call her crazy, she outranked me (not that that usually stopped me, I guess), but I'm pretty sure she was making things up or imagining them.

"Oh hell, you didn't know?" she said. "Damn. Forget I said anything."

"Like that's going to work." I said. I took a seat and waited.

"Milton is going to ream me for this." she told me, shaking her head and chuckling. "Habib is retiring." she said.

"Well I'm certainly not going to be given command of Science." I told her, forcing a laugh.

"No, no, not at all." She laughed at that idea. "No. Commander Tyler is moving over to take it, and Rowe is being promoted and given first officer."

"What does that have to do with me?" I asked. "Howard is senior to me, he'll be elevated to second."

"Howard is a nose fungus, and you know it." she told me. I caught myself mid nod and she smiled. "Captain Nelson is putting you up for promotion and wants to move you to second."

"Seriously?" I asked.

I was on cloud nine heading back to the bridge. Halfway there I decided I better stop in Administrative to talk to Sally.

"Have you seen Commander Wilson?" I asked the older gentleman, a crewman named George, who is pushing a broom across the office.

"Good mornin, ma'am!" he said, a smile broadening to fill his face. "How are ye this fine mornin? She's with someone in er office, I thin, Lieutenant." he said.

George used to run a small bistro on deck six. He quit and joined the crew when all his kids grew up and left home. I think he probably did it to stabilize his income. Being a lowly crewman didn't

pay much, but it was consistent, at least.

I'd always admired the man, and I knew I could learn a lot from him. Seeing him sweeping and wiping down the office, humming a jaunty tune as he did, reminded me of why. He did such a menial job, but he found a way to make things nicer for the rest of us. He didn't seem to see being a janitor as lowly work. He told me one time that every job is important, if you were contributing. I have always thought that was a great attitude.

When Sally finished with the guy she was talking to, she invited me in with a warning that she only had a moment, and she asked if Milton sent me. I told her no, I was there on my own, just needing to talk to her to give her a heads up on something.

"You may want to start searching for chiefs for Engineering." I told her.

"Did Bao say that?"

"No, but she's having trouble with the ones she has, and I really think it won't be long before she decides she can't work with them anymore. I just figured if you could find some people we could–"

"This isn't your business, Callie." she told me.

That set me back. Safety of the ship was a concern to everyone. Not to mention the fact that I was a trusted officer who knew more than the average officer when it came to the happenings onboard.

"I just figured it would save some time–"

"Stay out of it." she told me. "Commander Xiang is more than capable of handling her own personnel decisions. Until then, back off."

"Sally–"

"Lieutenant!" she said, getting angry. "Don't poke your nose into someone else's business."

"I wasn't trying–"

"You should go, I have to get ready for the next appointment."

"I'm sorry, I was just… I'll go."

I couldn't believe she was acting that way toward me! I mean… well, maybe she was right, but I was not completely wrong either! I just thought I had a good enough relationship with the senior staff that I could talk to them–especially Sally, whose quarters I spent so much time at back when I was in school and Anna and I were assigned as study partners.

“Callie,” she said, softening her tone as she opened the door for me. “You can always come talk to me. Just let the other departments handle their affairs, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I told her.

It hadn’t even occurred to me that Bao had already talked to Sally about this. It seems obvious to me now, though. I needed to trust them to do their part, just like I trusted crewman George to do his.

I made my way back to the bridge only to find a very loud argument going on. I could hear it fifty meters down the passage, even with the bridge door closed. And upon entry I found three ensigns all standing, facing each other, and not one of them at their consoles. Milton was not on the bridge, either.

“What's going on?” I asked the group.

“No!” Lewis said. “You're wrong, Stanley!”

“Wrong about what?” I persisted.

“I'm not wrong, I'm apparently the only one in here who gives a damn about the ship, though.” Cho responded.

“Hello,” I said, trying hard to get their attention.

“You don't have a clue what you're talking about, Cho.” Ensign Sokolov added to the discussion.

“Where is Milton?” I asked the trio.

“Just log it, Sokolov!” Cho ordered him.

“There's nothing to log!” Lewis shouted back.

“Hey!” I shouted. They didn't even look my way. “Ensign Lewis,” I said, trying to get his attention.

“I'm telling you–“ Cho began.

“Silence please.” came Milton's voice from behind me.

Of course all three ensigns immediately stopped their discussion and turned toward him. He didn't even have to shout. His voice was barely above his usual speaking voice.

I only wished I could do that.

“Someone, perhaps you Mister Cho, please explain to me what this discussion is about.” Milton said calmly.

“Sir, I've seen a lot of suspicious scans from the long range scanner reports recently.” he said.

“And what do you make of these suspicious scans, Mister Cho?” Milton asked.

“Too much, Captain.” Ensign Sokolov said.

I waited to see how Milton would react to Sokolov speaking when Milton was not talking to him. Milton remained relaxed. I would have been angry. I *was* angry. But instead of getting angry, Milton just calmly stared down Sokolov until he lowered his head and mumbled an apology.

“I think there are faults in our long range sensors. We need those sensors in case we come across something. If we can detect at this range it makes it much easier to change our course in time to miss it.” Cho explained.

“What was this disagreement about, may I ask?” Milton said, turning his gaze to Mister Lewis.

“He wanted us to log it as an error for Engineering. He said it was highest priority, and we needed to flag it for immediate action.”

“Thank you, Ensign Lewis. Now, Ensign Cho, do you believe this warrants emergency action?”

“Sir, if there is something there we need to know.” Cho answered.

“Of course, Ensign. How far out do you scan before you start getting anomalous readings?”

“At our current speed? Approximately nineteen days, Sir.”

“Which is why I keep telling him to just wait until we get more scans!” Sokolov interjected. “Sometimes we just have interference.”

“I see, Mister Sokolov. Thank you. Would you please return to your station now?”

“Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

“Please flag it for Engineering to check out. If they haven't gotten to it with then next five days I will speak to Commander Xiang about it directly.”

“Yes sir.” Cho said. “Thank you, sir.”

Milton took his seat as the others returned their attention to their duties and calm returned to the bridge. I slipped into my chair and turned in Milton's direction.

“Lieutenant?” he said, then sat silently waiting as I decided where to start.

I couldn’t ask about the promotion there in front of everyone, I couldn’t tell him Bao's Chiefs are neglecting their duties because it was a private personnel issue, and I couldn’t ask why he could calmly tell everyone to shut up and they do it while I couldn’t even order them to

answer me and get a response.

"Bao is on top of things, Captain." I said. "She assures me that things will be taken care of shortly."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

I turned back to my screen and brought up the scans that Ensign Cho was so concerned about. A lot of our scans were of interstellar bodies we encountered, looking for any sort of resources we could mine from them. When we came across something, whether it be an iron-rich asteroid or a hydrogen rich comet, we could alter our course to intercept, then send out our small mining shuttles to get what we could in a reasonable time. It was this constant mining, along with diligent recycling and entire decks filled with farms, that allowed the Freedom and our companion transport ship the UNSC Atlantic Gale–really just a flying hotel–to survive for over three hundred years with no resupply from Earth.

The majority of our scans, though, were just watching space in front of us for any impediments to our flight. Larger objects that may endanger the Freedom or the Gale required a course alteration. Even smaller objects could cause us to alter our course if there were enough of them. A heavy cloud of dust or micrometeoroids, for example. In those cases, in the very least, we would shutter all the ports and cancel any outdoor missions.

That is what should have happened the day my parents died.

Anyway, a small part of what we searched for with our scans were inhabitable worlds. That was the whole point of our mission, after all. Earth was falling apart, being destroyed by massive storms and choked by pollution, when the mission began. Apparently people were smart enough to see that was happening in time to organize together and send us out with plenty of time to allow us, or more accurately our ancestors, to search for a new place.

The United Nations Space Commission sent out eight ships. The science vessel UNSC Freedom–that would be us–and her transport ship, the UNSC Atlantic Gale; the UNSC Dragon and their transport the Tsunami; the UNSC Vitol and their transport the Bear; and the UNSC Peregrino and their transport the Salvador. Each science vessel was supposed to have a crew of around a hundred, and could carry up to twelve hundred additional passengers. We have about nine hundred passengers. The transports can exceed ten thousand aboard, and the

Gale has nearly that. The whole point is to jump start a new settlement and have things up and running before the first wave of immigrants from Earth arrive.

But we lost contact with Earth because of signal degradation and interference over a hundred years ago. If we ever found a habitable world we were going to send a relay back toward Earth just to get a signal to them and let them know. I hoped that the other ships were having more luck than us.

The scans that Cho was talking about weren't exactly empty. That would have been quite normal. But there were large empty spots in the midst of a very dispersed cloud of dust in those. It was hard to tell from that distance, but the dust was spread out enough that it shouldn't pose a risk to the ship. It looked like we may not even have to shutter the ports, if it was as minor as it appeared. But those empty spots were odd, and they worried me.

"Ensign Cho, can I see you when you have a moment please? Whenever you have time, no hurry." I said.

He didn't answer. I could drop it, but Milton was staring at me. He gave a sideward nod toward Cho and continued watching me.

"Mister Cho," I tried again, a little louder this time.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Did you hear what I just said?" I asked, trying to sound angry and failing.

"I'm sorry, we're you talking to me?"

I swiveled my head and gave Milton an exasperated look. He shook his head a little. *At me*. I turned my attention back to Ensign Cho.

"Yes, I was." I said, doing my best to show my annoyance in my voice.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't realize. Would you mind repeating what you said, Ma'am?" he replied, showing no recognition that I am annoyed.

"I..." It is stupid. And unfair. "I said," I sighed and rubbed at my left temple. "Yes, I just said I need to speak with you when you have a moment."

"I was just running through my dailies, ma'am. Would twenty minutes be okay?"

“Yes, Mister Cho. Thank you.”

Ensign Cho swiveled back to his station and I leaned back in the seat and started rubbing my right temple to match my left one. I needed to figure out a way to get the rest of the crew to stop ignoring me. I was going to be second officer! You couldn't just ignore your second officer. It wasn’t right.

Of course it wasn’t right to ignore your third officer, either.

Milton invited me to the ready room just off the bridge. It was kind of odd. And when I entered oddness continued, as Milton nodded for me to take the seat to the right of him, where Sally usually sat during meetings. As a junior officer, I didn’t have a chair at the table in the ready room. Junior officers were instead seated around the room, directly behind the commander of their respective division.

“What are you concerned with on the scans Ensign Cho was referring to?” he asked me.

“I can’t say for sure, Milton. I just… need to look into it.”

“Yes, you should. I want you to let me know if you find anything. If anyone can, it’ll be you.”

“I’ll make sure to let you know.”

He got a more serious look then, and steepled his fingers together on the edge of the table. He had that look on his face that he always gets when he was about to say something that I was going to find uncomfortable.

“What is your view of how that went, Callie?” he asked me.

“Excuse me?”

“How do you interpret that interaction with Ensign Cho?”

“He was ignoring me, Milton.” I said, angry he'd even ask me that.

“Hm,” he said, nodding. “I don't think you're quite right about that, Callie.”

“But–“

“Listen,” he said, holding his hand up to silence me. “You do not project. You talk quietly, and sometimes that leads others to either not hear clearly, or even not know which of them you are speaking to. It's a weakness you need to work on.”

“But... but the, uh, promotion?” I said. Immediately I felt like crap, figuring he’d know Bao had told me.

“I want you to spend more time with your crewmates, Callie. If

you're ever going to be captain you're going to need a grasp of their personalities and their problems."

Even he knew my goal was to be captain one day. I didn't go around talking about it a lot, but I thought he picked it up from our conversations at home. Especially from when I was younger and more open about things.

"I know the crew well enough." I argued. "Isn't it more important to know the ship?"

"You know this ship better than anyone aboard!" he said, laughing. "Probably better than the designers, actually. You know the ship, you know the regulations, but do you know enough about the crew? Or the passengers, for that matter?"

"I... don't know." I admitted.

I hadn't ever given that a whole lot of consideration. It was a valid point, though. I guess.

"Bao knows more about the ship." I said.

"I doubt it."

"So I'm not getting the promotion?" I asked, disappointment obvious in my voice.

"I don't believe anyone said anything like that." he told me. "I wondered how long until you found out. Too many people know to keep it a secret, I suppose. But I'm still going to need you to stay on systems for a while."

"But–"

"You can do both." he said. "For now. Eventually that duty should probably be handed off to someone in Engineering, where it was supposed to be anyway."

Maybe that's why people thought I was getting special treatment, because that position was supposed to be in Engineering. Maybe he did it to help me along, to give me something important to do in his division, where he could keep an eye on me and help. At least I wondered about that.

"Milton, do you... um..." How do I ask someone who raised me if they are giving me special treatment? "Do you give me special treatment?" By blurting it out, I guess.

His laugh did not make me feel any better. Neither did the *isn't that obvious* look on his face.

“In what way?” he asked. “In how I allow you to call me by name? In how I overlook your obvious disdain for the usual uniform code? How I–“

“The regulations clearly state that whether to require full uniform in day to day operations is completely at the discretion of the sitting captain of a ship!”

“How I let you talk back to me?” he added.

“Sorry.”

All that time I had been given unfair treatment. I couldn’t accept it. Not the treatment, not the promotion, none of it.

And it was killing me.

“Captain, sir,” I said, standing and snapping to attention. “If you please, sir, I would ask that you kindly remove my name from consideration for promotion.”

He stopped smiling, stopped laughing, and looked at me with a blank stare. The stare lasted for a solid minute, during which time I felt the tears rolling down my cheek.

“You want to be captain more than you want to breathe.” he told me. “I know that. I even know your reasons, Callie. This is a good step in that direction. And while I don't plan on turning the job over anytime soon, I think you will eventually make an excellent successor. Why would you want to delay that?”

“Because, sir,” I said, choking on my tears. “I want to *deserve it* when it happens, Captain Nelson.”

“Sit!” he snapped at me.

I immediately took a seat, doing my best to remain at attention while seated. It was harder than it sounds. Especially for me!

“There isn't a person on this ship–at least not who knows piddly piss about anything–who doesn't think you deserve a promotion as much as anyone else. Not if they are being completely honest and unbiased, anyway.”

“I don't want special treatment.” I insisted.

“Do you think I personally guide every other officer on this ship, Callie? Do you think I intentionally give way too much work, or... or impossible tasks to each of them because I know they need challenged if they are to grow? Of course you get special treatment!”

He said, getting riled up.

"But–"

"Silence!" he demanded. "I raised you, or tried, and I know you better than I know any of them. I have a personal stake in your career, and in you as a person. And dammit, I care about you more than any of them."

"Sir–"

"So yes, you get special treatment. You get much harsher treatment, in a lot of ways, because I know you can handle it and I know you need it to grow. There isn't a thing wrong with that, either. And anyone who thinks otherwise can come talk to me about it."

"Yes, sir." I said, when he looked over at me like he was waiting for a response.

"No more nonsense about turning down a promotion."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"And stop calling me sir!"

I couldn't help it, I started laughing. That may have been the first time he'd ever said that to me. Usually he was reminding me that I should be showing proper respect due his office when we're in the company of others.

"And speaking of challenging tasks," he said cryptically. "How are you coming with that file?"

"Sir? Uh... Milton?"

"The file you've been trying to crack for the past three years?" he asked, a serious look on his face.

Goodbye life. It was good to know you.

"I... I..." I stammered.

I could feel the blood draining from my face. He knew! All that time, he knew that I was trying to break into his file. I was so dead.

But it occurred to me that he knew even before making me the systems officer, based on what he just told me.

"I'm sorry." I squeaked.

"You are not." he said.

People kept telling me that when I apologized!

"I just... I..." I searched for an excuse, a reason I would be

poking around in his personal files.

"It turns out the contents of that particular file have been transferred to a slimdrive in my safe back in my room." he said, smiling. "I've been wondering if you'd ever figure out how to crack it."

"So... so, um, how long have you known?" I asked. I couldn't look at him.

"Since the beginning." he told me. "I have an alarm on that file. I'm surprised you didn't find it."

"So, um, how is it that I haven't been able to, um, figure out how to open the file?" I queried, scared but interested.

"I wondered that myself. I figured you'd catch on to what I was doing. I use Parthenian encryption, then overlay a type two QPS encryption seeded with a password."

"I know." I whispered. "I wrote a decryption module to..."

"But I change the seed every third day."

"I know that too." I told him, nodding and listening intently.

"And after the first three months I started reusing the original list of seed words, randomly choosing one to seed the second stage."

"Seriously?!" I asked.

He nodded and I leaned back in my seat and stared up at the overhead. I couldn't believe it was so simple! I never thought to recheck the seeds that I had already ruled out. There was a lesson there, I suppose.

"I'm such a gorp." I whispered.

"There is something important on that slimdrive, Callie." he said softly, as he nodded in agreement that I was a gorp. "When the time is right, make sure you are the first to see it. The combination is your birthdate. Make sure you get it before the others override the combination and open it themselves."

"What is it?" I asked, a little scared by the way he said it.

"Now, let's talk about this promotion." he said, smiling and raising his eyebrows to let me know the subject of the slimdrive contents was closed. "I plan a staff meeting tomorrow to make the announcement. We will vote at that time. If you are still unsure about this, you have until that time to persuade me not to put you up. Otherwise, I'll expect you there."

"I'll be there, Milton." I said, nodding. "Thank you."

"Good. I still expect you to spend some time away from duty getting to know your fellow crewmates. Please, Callie, don't make me regret promoting you."

"But Milton,"

"You need this. The crew needs this."

“But what do I do?” I asked.

“Find something. Some way to interact on a social level.”

“So I have to get to know the whole crew?”

“No, don't be ridiculous. But by getting to know even a few of them now you will show that you are one of them, approachable, and that you aren't just interested in the technical details, that you really care about your crewmates.”

“Ugh.”

“Just try, Callie.”

“I will. I guess.” I hated it, though. “Is it an order?”

“It's a request.”

“I don't even know where to start, though!”

“You're a smart girl,” he said. “You'll figure it out. Start with the ones you know already. Start with the one I know you want to spend more time with.”

He couldn’t know that, but the look on his face said he did. And of course that brought me back to the dream from the previous night, which I had been working hard all day to not think about.

The rest of the day was spent staring at my screen, looking at the scans Ensign Cho had been concerned about. My discussion about it with him didn’t net anything. He was as clueless about it as I was, but he was adamant that he had never seen scans quite like those. He wanted the scanners checked. After calming down, he was certain it was just an error in them.

I didn’t agree with that, though. Something was off, and I knew it. I could feel it.

## Chapter Two

The next day I struggled to climb from bed after only an hour of sleep. Again. It was far too common of an occurrence.

I dressed and went to deck seven to Medical, passing at least a dozen people in the passage, even at that early hour. Almost none of them bothered to acknowledge me. One girl did smile back over her shoulder at me.

At least the nurse–a civilian named Audry who doubled as receptionist–responded quickly when I entered.

"Good morning, Lieutenant. How are you today?" she asked.
"Good, thank you. How are you?"
"Are you here to see Dr. Burton?" she asked, as she continued typing away on her terminal.
"Is he around?"
"He's with someone right now. Do you mind waiting?"
"I don't mind."

I sat in the waiting room, staring at the empty seats around me and the dull paper on the bulkhead, and I began to contemplate what Milton had said about interacting with the crew more. I wasn't even sure how to do that. Even when I was out of my room doing things, I was almost always some place like that, where I sat alone or nearly alone while I waited for someone else.

"Thanks, Doc." I heard a young woman say to Mark.
"Let me know how that works, Shauna." he said. "You have a good day now dear."

Maybe I could talk to her, I thought. I was in school with her for a while, and we had always gotten along okay. But before I could even say hello she hurried off.

I folded my tablet into four and slid it into the pocket on the

front of my dress. By the time I stood and turned toward him, Mark was beside me, smiling and waiting.

"How are you this morning, Callie?" he asked, his voice sounding strong and sure despite his age.

"Exhausted." I told him.

"Right this way, young lady." he told me, extending his hand toward the passage that led to the examination rooms and his office.

Mark was seventy five and looked even older still. He was still strong and spry, and seemed healthy enough to make it to a hundred. He had a kindly, grandfatherly attitude toward me, and I assume a lot of the crew and passengers, and he was universally loved by all except Liam Tyler, our first officer. Liam didn't seem to like him very well. Even the people who thought Mark being gay was immoral still somehow loved him.

"In here, hon." Mark said.

He motioned me toward his office, not one of the exam rooms. He did that sometimes. When I was younger I thought he had mistakenly thought it was a social visit and hadn't understood I was there as a patient.

"You are having problems sleeping again?" he asked.

"Yes. I just can't shut my brain off. I get started thinking of one little thing, and then my mind just runs on and on, down every detail. And I get sidetracked." I said. I took a breath. "Like last night, I started thinking about what Milton said. I have no idea how to even start, so how the heck am I ever going to actually accomplish it? And even if I did know how to start, what if I screwed it up? What if I say something or do something and just make matters worse? What if I embarrass myself and everyone laughs at me? How can I even–"

"Whoa there, Callie." he said, raising his hand up to stop me. He eased back in his chair. "I'd ask you to speak to Counselor Klebbs, but–"

"No!"

"But you would just be difficult and say no." he continued. "The Amblipen worked well last time?" he asked.

"It helped some, but not a lot." I admitted.

After the last time, even though it hadn't been working for a while, I told him it had. I just hadn't wanted to complain anymore, and I finally managed to get a good night of sleep after a while

anyway.

Mark nodded and spun his chair around, facing away from me. He used the thumb pad to unlock the door on the medicine locker, then reached in and pulled out a bottle. After carefully reading the label, he switched it for the one next to it. He pulled his tablet up, scanned the barcode on the bottle, entered a number, then printed off a label, sticking it to a bottle in which he put ten of the pills.

"Try this," he said, spinning back to me and extending the bottle. "It's a little higher dose of the same medication. Only one per night, remember."

"Thanks, Mark." I said, feeling my eyes well up.

"Now no need for water works, little girl. Everyone gets help here when they need it."

"I just… I just…"

I just didn't like asking for help. Not from him, not from anyone really. And over the past several months I had relied too much on help from him. It was one thing to get help for the ship while I was on duty, but getting help for something personal annoyed me. I didn't ever want to rely on someone else again. Not after what happened to Mom and Dad.

"Thanks!" I said, getting myself under control. "I better get going."

"What is it that Captain Nelson spoke about that had you so keyed up?" he asked.

"It was nothing," I said, holding up the bottle of pills. "Thanks aga–"

"Why don't you just share with me what it was and maybe I can help ease your mind. Surely, if nothing else, talking to someone about it may help."

"I really have to get going." I said, springing up to my feet and toward the door.

"You're not on duty for two more hours, Callie." he said. "I can make it an order, Lieutenant."

"Seriously?" I asked, stopping halfway out the door.

"Have a seat." he told me, flicking his eyes from mine toward the chair.

Great. Now I got to embarrass myself even more. Wonderful. Thrilling.

“Mark,” I began, as I sat again. “I just… I don’t want… I mean I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I assure you, dear, whatever it is, I can be trusted to keep it between us.”

“It’s not that, it’s just… um... “ I shrugged. “Okay.”

As embarrassing as it was, I stammered my way through an explanation that Milton would like me to interact with the crew more, and that I had no idea how. He listened and gave me an encouraging look, along with nods to keep going, as I voiced my concerns about saying stupid things if I tried to interact with others socially.

He leaned back and spent a moment silently contemplating what I said. He had his hand up, two fingers extended across his wrinkled mouth, as he considered things before speaking.

“Your biggest issue, as I see it,” he began. “Is that everywhere you can go that will keep you busy will either be work related, awkward for you to just suddenly join in with, or too loud and busy to actually get to know anyone in any case.”

“I guess.” I agreed, shrugging.

“Perhaps you need to do something you’re already good at, so you’re comfortable in talking about it.”

“I don’t know what I’d be good at, other than work.”

“Perhaps that is the answer then, maybe?” he asked.

“I… um, don’t understand.”

“Did you know there is a non-denominational worship group on deck six? Awareness is its name. Of course you do, you know this ship backwards and forwards–and probably many other ways as well.”

“I don’t really know if I feel comfortable joining a religion just to–”

“But would you feel comfortable volunteering to teach their youth group about ship operations in the evening? The pastor there, Obalesh Lakhanpal, is a wonderful fellow. He has been running a youth outreach for years now. They have things like game nights, dances, and homework help. I think he would be happy if you would help some of the children on this ship understand how Freedom works a little better.”

“You want me to teach?” I asked, shocked at the very idea. Me? Teach? Right. “Mark, I don’t know how to teach–”

“Au contraire,” he said. “You know plenty. I’ve seen you helping junior officers, you’re pretty good at explaining things in a way a layperson can understand.”

“Explain, yes, but teach–”

“Just give it a try.” he said, laughing. “It may even help your sleeping troubles.”

I thought through what he was suggesting. It would take away time I usually spent poring over the ship schematics and regulations, but I could do it if it would help my career.

But would it? How would teaching a bunch of kids how the ship works really help that? I didn’t think that spending time talking to a bunch of kids was quite what Milton had in mind.

“There are several crewmembers I know of who volunteer there as well, so you’d have the opportunity to get to know them and possibly work with them on this.” he said before I could even manage to argue that very thing.

“Okay, so, uh… you’re gay.” I said.

“I’m flattered that you would remember, dear.” he said, laughing. “Yes, I am. You’re point?”

“I mean everyone knows it.” I pointed out.

“Yes. And?”

“And this church doesn’t eek you out?” I asked.

“These are a warm and welcoming bunch, Callie. Not at all like NOCO, not judgemental at all, so they won’t have a problem with your being gay.”

“I’m not… I mean… not *out*, so it doesn’t matter.”

“When you are–”

“But I won’t be. I have no reason to be. I just don’t want to be around a bunch of people who are judgemental like that.”

“Well when you change your mind and decide to tell others then–”

“I won’t.”

“*When* you come out, they will be supportive.”

“I’m never going to have a relationship, so I have no reason to come out.”

“When you do, they’ll be supportive.” he insisted.

“Mark, you’re not listening to me. Only you and Milton have any idea, and I have no plan to ever change that. I just don’t see the point.”

“Yes, okay.” he said, nodding and giving me a condescending smile.

Mark ordered me to at least look into the worship center, then he finally dismissed me. I hated it when anyone pulled rank and ordered me around, but he had almost never done that before, and I

think it was worse coming from him because of that.

It felt really awkward to walk into the worship center on six. The place was light and airy, with warm tones of maroon decorating the bulkheads and furniture. The deck was a light colored wood, the grain vibrant and beautiful. There was a picture on the bulkhead which showed many people of all ages working together on a quilt, all smiling and happy.

A small, older man was seated at a fuzzy grey sofa. He was wearing a long ornate jacket, and bowed down toward a table, blowing out a scented candle. He stood and approached me with a contented smile.

"Greetings upon you, miss." he said, bowing his head.

He was shorter than I am– something rare in anyone older than me. There was no hair on his head, but the skin there was so wrinkled that it almost appeared as if there was.

"Hi, uh…" I paused, unsure of how to refer to this man.
"I am Pastor Lakhanpal. You may call me Obalesh."
"Hi Obalesh, I'm–"
"Miss Monroe." he completed, smiling.
"Callie." I told him. "Mark… Dr. Burton, he sent me down here to–"
"Has Mark sent me another wayward soul? Oh my. Would you like to have a seat, Callie?" he asked, motioning toward yet another sofa–this one some leather-like material, but still gray. "Care for some herbal tea, or perhaps some chicory coffee?"
"Thank you, but no. Um… Mark thought–"
"He sent you to volunteer, I think." he said, nodding as his hands came together in front of his face, almost as if he were praying. "Yes?"
"How did you–"
"It is well he sent you, we have many children from families not conscripted to the ship." he told me, turning his back to me as he filled a tiny cup with steaming tea from a small ceramic pot.
"We don't conscript our crew, we–"
"Ah," he said, raising a hand and letting out a soft chuckle. "I do not mean to offend, young Callie, only to clarify that the children have no family whom to ask about this wondrous bit of technology we call home."

The man was weird. And that's an understatement on the galactic scale. I swear I kept seeing his ears twitch, too, which was odd because I had never seen a human being with twitchy ears before.

"You have not yet taken a seat?" he asked, sweeping his hand in a motion toward the sofa. "Please do so, let us speak of your purpose for visiting."

"Um…" I sat and stared up at him as he extended a cup of tea toward me. "Uh, thanks?"

He nodded as he bowed, which ended up looking like some kind of seizure. Then he turned and poured another tiny cup from the pot. He sat beside me, his tea in one hand, and waved the other hand over it as he mumbled something that sounded like a blessing.

"I'm not sure what you–"

"Twice per week we allow crew who feel called to serve visit and help the youngest of our assembly understand this vessel, help with homework, entertain them with games, and on occasion share their faith."

"Do you have ma–"

"You will make three." he said, sipping from his tea.

He nodded toward my tea and raised his eyes, his wrinkly eyebrows shoving back on his head. I reached for the cup, but it was still so hot that I couldn't hold it. He blew out what could have been a stifled laugh.

"It is a practiced skill." he said. "Would you prefer something cool? Perhaps some water, or a soft drink?"

"No, I–"

"You will come tomorrow evening, and the evening four days hence." he said, doing that nod-bow thing again, this time from a seated position. "You will remain for one hour, helping our other two volunteers."

"I just wanted to know more abou–"

"I must prepare now." he said, rising. "We have scheduled a ceremony for the expecting couples. You are free to remain, as always, if you wish."

"No, I have to–"

"Have a blessed day, young Callie."

He moved swiftly away from me, taking fifty tiny steps to cross the room, where he pressed a button to open the door into the next

room.

When I left the room, I was confused. It seems I'd been drafted? I was the third officer, why was I letting some random civvy tell me what to do? And did Mark set this whole thing up? I smelled a conspiracy.

When I reached the bridge I took my usual seat and pulled up my systems admin screen. Milton cleared his throat beside me, which caused me to turn his direction and look up.

"You, Lieutenant, are an hour early." he said.
"Yes." I told him. "And? I'm usually early."
"Yes," he said back, adding "but I thought you might be addressing the crew issue we spoke of yesterday."
"Oh, I have already. I was up early."
"I see." He said, nodding. "Would you care to elaborate?"
"Not really." I told him.
"Lieutenant," he said, giving me that look he had that told me he was not in the mood.
"Um…" I mumbled.

The three ensigns on duty that morning, Lewis, Cho and a newcomer to the shift, Ensign Merriweather, were all watching me carefully. The job got a little slow for the ensigns sometimes, and they were known to spend a lot of time collecting data to share later during gossip sessions.

"In private, Captain?" I said, as formally as I could muster at that time of day.
"Of course." he said.

I followed him into the ready room, taking our same seats from the day before. He pulled out his tablet and unfolded it, sliding a stylus from his shirt pocket to keep notes.

"Please explain what you've done this morning to address your shortcoming on crew interaction." He asked, setting his stylus against the screen.
"I am volunteering to help teach kids about the ship at one of the churches on board." I informed him. "That should help me work with others."
"Children." he said.
"It's a start!" I told him, knowing it sounded defensive. "And

I'll be working with some other crew, and there are some adults there. And besides–"

"Relax," he said, raising a hand and smiling. "It is a good start, you are right. I think that's a good idea. Just remember, it's a start and not the end of it. This is an ongoing process. Even I have to mingle from time to time."

"Yes, I know." I sighed and wiped at my blurry, tired eyes. "This is hard for me. Harder than systems and the ship, harder than the regulations and command presence."

"I know it doesn't come naturally for you, Callie. Like your mother, you're soft spoken. There are some who are like that, and they prefer to lead by example. That works well sometimes, but senior officers, and captains especially, need the respect of the crew, and at times need to be able to delegate. You need to know your crew well to do that. And you need to be a diplomat, and you need to know something about people in general for that. Truth be told, being captain is half politics."

"I know." I told him, though at that time I had no idea how much.

"And you still want that?"

"More than you can possibly know." I assured him.

I couldn't see the whole purpose of my parents dying if I didn't make it to captain. The *only* good I could even imagine coming out of that was me being captain so I could stop it from happening to another child.

I realized I couldn't be sure that Milton wouldn't ever make the same kind of mistakes that Captain Donaldson, his predecessor, made. I didn't think he would, but I was *certain* I wouldn't. I would implement stronger rules, making it more difficult for future captains as well.

"This afternoon, around fourteen hundred, I plan to have a meeting in the staff conference room. Please wear a uniform, Callie."

"Yes, okay." I agreed.

I never really liked the uniform. It was one of the biggest problems I had with the job. It was itchy and uncomfortable. Most of all, it wasn't cute. It just wasn't.

Milton and I went back onto the bridge, and I spent several more minutes on those scans. There was something about them that bother me, but I couldn't figure out what. I looked at other scans from

the system to see if there were any other anomalies. Sure enough, there was one.

"Miss Merriweather," I said, waiting for her to either respond or turn to acknowledge she heard me before I continued. She turned to look at me, but did not say anything. "Would you please scan an area about ten degrees either side of the third planet?" I asked.

"Ma'am?" she said, but then nodded and added "Aye, ma'am."

"Please forward the results to me when they are completed. Oh, and do a full echo on them, please."

"Yes, ma'am, Lieutenant." she said.

"What is this about?" Milton asked me.

"I'm not sure." I said, shrugging. "Gut feeling."

"Ah," he nodded. "Keep me informed."

"I will."

"Anything further on the scans from before?"

"Not yet." I told him. It was eating me up.

"Well, let me know when you're sure there isn't anything. Until then we'll proceed as planned."

The entire system had been almost a total waste of time. We hadn't found any planets that had any kind of resources we could use, let alone any that met our needs for inhabitation. We were able to resupply some of our lost hydrogen on one moon at least, but not enough to warrant coming to the system. We *were* able to extract a very high quality magnesium from one asteroid.

A nagging tug inside told me there was more, though. When I looked over everything, the only area our probes and scans hadn't ruled out as potentially interesting–at least to *my* standards–was the area I requested Merriweather scan again. We had scanned it two dozen times, and gotten data back from four of the five probes sent. All had shown zilch that would be of use to us near the area I was asking about. The fifth probe, though, got pulled into a higher than expected gravitational pull and burned up in one of the gas giant planets in that section of the system.

Still…

I was probably wasting our time and resources by scanning again, but figured it was worth a shot. Maybe we would find a hydrogen rich rock around there, or a meteoroid with large aluminum deposits or something else of use to us.

At thirteen hundred hours I left the bridge and headed down to deck five, to the main cafeteria, for lunch. There were specialty restaurants aplenty, and I made enough as a lieutenant to afford to eat nicer fare than the cafeteria offered up, but I preferred to spend my money on things like clothing and movies. I am not a picky eater, other than being vegetarian, and the cafeteria had decent food at a cheap price.

Even if I had to sit with others for it.

I waited in the serving line with the other crew and passengers, sliding my tray along the stainless counter as we passed each station. I went for some tofu mac and cheese, a garden salad, and orange juice.

"How ya doin', Miss Calliope?" the clerk at the register asked. "You really like your tofu, girl." she added, smiling.

"Hi Doreen," I said. "Yeah, I'm predictable."

"Comes to two eighty five." she said. "Quick Deduct?" she asked.

"Yes, please." I told her, and stared into the biometric scanner.

"You're all set, Miss Calliope. You wanna receipt, girl?"

"If you don't mind."

"Alrighty, have a nice day."

As I walked away I felt my tablet vibrate, signifying that my mailbox had just received the receipt. I continued across the room to my usual table, and plopped down and pulled out my tablet for some light reading. I unfolded it, then swiped down to the scans that Merriweather had sent me.

I was buried in that when someone bumped into my back as they walked past, jostling my hand and causing me to spill juice on the table.

"Oh shit, I'm so sorry Callie!" a voice exclaimed. I glanced up at her. Shauna Cook.

"That's okay." I said, mopping at the mess with the one napkin I had.

"Here," she said, handing me her napkin. "I'll get some more real quick."

I soaked most of the juice up with the two napkins before she got back. When she returned she sat across from me and wiped at the

rest of it as she spoke.

"How have you been?" she asked.
"Uh, good."

Shauna and I were in school together until I graduated a few months before. She was actually a little older than me, I think, but she was a couple of grades below me, meaning we didn't really interacted a lot. All of the classes above sixth were taught in the same classroom, so we were in the same room a lot. There were occasionally projects when the teacher would assign us to help someone in a lower grade, and I worked with her twice on those, but we weren't really friends. We had always gotten along, but that's about it.

"People have missed you at school." she told me.
"Oh, uh,"

This was one of those awkward situations that I came across where I never knew what to say. What, I missed them too? Not really, I was too busy.

"It's good to see you." I said, trying to sound sincere.
"Hey, a few of us are getting together this weekend to watch old vids. If I remember correctly, you're a bit of a vid buff, right? You should join us."

Oh great. What would Milton want me to do here, though? I barely knew these people, didn't share any interests with them–other than movies, apparently–and never really enjoyed being around them.

"Uh, sure." I said, smiling and not feeling it.
"Oh!" she said, lighting up. "Wait, for reals? Damn, Gilbert is going to shit a comet when he hears this. Boy has such a crush on you, did you know?"
"I, uh," I'm a little shocked that someone has a crush on me, but disappointed at the same time. It *would be* him, wouldn't it? "I didn't know."
"He'll be there too. Hey, if you're interested in him I can set it up so the rest of us leave you two alone together for a while?"
"No!" I said, barely below a shout.
"Hey, Gilbert's a decent type, ya know?" she argued.
"I'm sure, I just… uh, don't think of him that way."
"Why not? He drips sex. He works out like a maniac, has a flowing bod."

"I think I've seen him around the gym." I told her, trying to make my way through the asteroid field of a conversation untouched.

"And you're still not in for it?" she asked, laughing. "What the hell, you a lez?"

"Uh…"

"Just shitting you." she said, laughing. "If he doesn't blaze you he doesn't. Anyway, still coming?"

"I suppose." I said, even less sure than before.

"Great!" She glanced up at the screen on the bulkhead. "Damn, I already gotta get back to class. See ya later, Callie."

"Uh, bye." I told her.

I watched her go, then noticed Milton sitting across the cafeteria. He smiled and glanced the way Shauna had just come, then nodded back at me. I guess that was what he wanted me to do more of.

At fourteen hundred I was ready and waiting in my dress uniform from school. Yeah, it was the kind mostly twelve year olds wore, and probably too young looking for me, and definitely shorter on me than it was designed for, but it still fit. So when Milton summoned me into the conference room on deck nine I was ready and waiting.

And I was forced to continue waiting outside in the passage for over forty minutes as all of the senior officers and the majority of the junior officers held the meeting without me.

It seemed undignified to me for a soon to be second officer to have to slouch in the passage as dozens of crew, and even a few passengers, strolled by.

Ridiculous.

I managed to drag myself to a complete upright stance when I heard the door to the conference room sliding open down the passage from me. I turned toward it just in time to have Lieutenant Roger Howard, the other third mate, brush past me. He banged my shoulder as he hurried away from the room with a very angry look on his face.

"Hey!" I said.

"Entitled bitch." he muttered, continuing down the passage.

"We're ready for you now, Lieutenant." Sally said from the doorway.

I followed her into the room and began to go around the table to my usual seat at the captain's left and behind him. Instead she stopped me and pointed to the end of the table and asked me to stand.

"Commander Wilson," Milton said. "If you would be so kind as to give Lieutenant Monroe a quick rundown of the meeting thus far, please."

She went through what I already knew, that Commander Habib had resigned and that Liam was moving over to Science to take over.

"Shall I continue?" she asked milton.

"Lieutenant Howard protested our plans when they were announced." Milton told me. "He spent fifteen minutes arguing the finer points of the regulations with Commander Wilson and myself before accepting my offer that he remove himself from this meeting."

"That would explain a few things." I said softly.

"What was that, Lieutenant?" Sally asked.

"Uh," Oh crap! It isn't the time to be disrespectful. "What I was referring to, ma'am, was… I mean that would explain why he rushed past me a moment ago, ma'am."

"Yes," she said, nodding. "Anyway, I believe that brings us to it." She looked at Milton and he nodded. "The captain has proposed that we elevate Lieutenant Second Class Calliope Monroe to lieutenant first class. All in favor please signify now." she told the assembled communication linked crowd.

A chorus of ayes followed. I was stunned. All of the senior staff except Liam said aye very quickly and clearly, even Commander Habib. And at least two thirds of the junior officers seemed to vehemently support me being elevated, with some others also agreeing to a lesser extent.

"Opposed?" Sally asked.

Liam and a handful of junior officers, three I believe, said nay. Liam seemed particularly angry at this turn of events. He looked as if he wanted to speak, but Sally continued without waiting. The senior officers are usually given an opportunity to speak after those votes.

"That proposal is approved." she said. "The captain further proposes we move Lieutenant First Class Calliope Monroe to second

officer. All in favor please signify now."

The vote was, as you'd expect, mostly the same. And when she asked for the nays there was the same response, with one of my supporters to promote me to first class dropping to oppose me being second mate.

"This is not the proper procedure!" Liam protested.

"Commander Tyler," Sally began.

"She does not meet the requirements for the position and we have not followed the proper procedures to exempt her from those requirements!"

"We covered this when she was promoted to chief, Commander." Milton said. "And before that, when she was promoted to ensign two, and before that when she was made a recruit. Do we really need to do that *again* Liam?"

"Absolutely!" Liam said.

I was *shaking* from anger. It wasn't fair! I had just been promoted to second officer and he wanted to take that away from me. No!

"Very well," Milton said, rolling his eyes as he faced me. "I hereby propose we exempt the age restrictions on Calliope Monroe for the purposes of promoting her to lieutenant first class, as per our already approved vote. Lieutenant Monroe, would you care to say anything to support this move before we vote?"

"Sir," I said, seething. "I believe I'll stand on my record, Captain."

"Very well."

"I have something to say." Liam said. "Her age is a factor that we should take seriously. She not only doesn't have the benefit of the life experiences that an older crewman may have, she also lacks the years of experience we would usually expect before a promotion to second officer. I believe we should give Miss Monroe a few more years before we make a move like this. During that time she will gain the necessary seasoning that will allow the rest of the crew to trust and respect her authority."

"With that–"

"Captain?" I said. "I *do* have a response to that, if I may?"

"Go ahead." he said, lifting his hand toward me as he nodded. Some of the assembled crew eyed me warily, as if they thought my speaking out was a mistake.

"As Commander Tyler has pointed out, I do not have the age

that most second officers would have,"

"You'd be the youngest known by over four years." Liam said.

"But I've officially been working as a member of this crew for almost six years. Six hours a day, on top of school, at first, plus about twelve hours a day on weekends. Since graduating, I've been working at least twelve hours a day. And all of that doesn't count the endless hours I spend studying this ship and its operations in my time off. This job is my life, and there is no one more dedicated to this ship than I am."

"Call the vote, Commander Wilson." Milton ordered.

The same people who had previously approved did so again, along with two of the dissenters. It was nice to hear, and I was able to breathe a sigh of relief. I was afraid they wouldn't.

"At the end of this meeting Lieutenant Calliope Monroe will assume the role of second officer." Sally announced. "Is there any other business?" she asked.

"Thank you all for your time." Milton said. "This meeting is dismissed."

People stuck around for a while, all standing and talking to each other. Bao, Sally and Mark all hurried over to congratulate me. So did some of the junior officers. Even Liam managed a grudging congratulations, and the reiteration that he thought I was very qualified, he just worried about my age and experience.

"You all packed up?" First Officer Rowe asked, grabbing onto my hand and shaking it.

"Packed?"

"Don't worry, I'll be out of my quarters by this evening. Commander Tyler already has a team moving his things over closer to Science and I'll be moving into his quarters this evening."

"Nice. Better than your current quarters, for sure." I told him. His quarters were much smaller and way toward the stern. For someone who spent most of his day either on the bridge or around it in the ready room or other assorted offices, it was annoying.

"Yeah, sorry you're getting stuck with it. But if you need help repainting or anything I can find a couple of guys to help out."

"What was that?" I asked.

"Oh, I need to go catch Chief Thompson. He needs to cover a shift tonight for someone. Excuse me."

I wasn't sure what he had just said, but it sounded like I was

supposed to be moving into the quarters that he was vacating. That couldn't be right, I was only fifteen. Milton was still technically my guardian for a while.

"Milton," I said, hurrying over to him. "Hey, Milton,"

He was talking to Zeeshan Habib and two ensigns from Science. They were all laughing about something.

"Captain," I tried again. That got his attention, finally. "I need to talk to you."

"Ah Lieutenant, congratulations!" he said. He broke role and actually hugged me.

"Uh, thanks, I think. Milton, Chester said something about me moving into his quarters?"

"Yes." he said. His smile faded a bit. "We can talk about this later on, Callie."

"But… I mean–"

"Now is not the time, Callie." he said. "We'll discuss it as soon as we get back home."

I nodded and moved away from him. As much as I tried to mingle with the others, I couldn't. I didn't even enjoy the chocolate milk I drank while everyone else was drinking coffee or tea. I've always loved chocolate milk.

I finally excused myself and hurried back to my room. I felt a bit overwhelmed, to be honest. I wanted it so much, but was Liam right? And could I live alone? I had a hard enough time sleeping, I didn't know if I could even do that when Milton wasn't just a room away.

When Milton got back I ambushed him in the shared living area.

"You're kicking me out?!" I shouted. I felt tears begin.

"Callie, just wait–"

"I… I don't understand how you can do this? What did I do wrong? I… I don't even bother you for meals, I just get my own. I try my hardest to not bother you, and… I mean–"

"I'm not kicking you out." he said. He sat at the table and patted the table in front of the seat nearest him. "Sit."

"Milton,"

"Have a seat so we can discuss this." he insisted.

I took a seat. I wasn't happy about it, but I sat and fidgeted with my fingers while I tried to avoid looking at him. I knew I was acting like a child, but I just couldn't stop myself. The tears and outburst, they just… weren't usually me.

"We always try to keep the second officer physically separate from the captain and first officer quarters in case of disaster."

"I… know." I said, nodding. "Section 25a, paragraph 3. It covers contingencies for continuation of command."

"Yes. You do understand this is a big step up for you, Callie? As of right now, if something were to happen to me and Lieutenant Rowe you would be in charge of the whole ship. You'd be elevated to captain."

"That's true." I said, smiling at the thought.

That was a wonderful thing! Well, other than them having to die first, of course.

"It's commander now, though." I reminded him. "Chester is a commander."

"Of course." he said, laughing. "My door is always open to you, Callie. You can come and go as you like. I'm not even changing my code on the door."

"Not that it would stop me if you did." I said, smiling at the thought that any door on the ship would stop me if I really wanted in. "Okay. I understand."

"Good. Now, as of tonight you are on overnight shift."

"Overnight? Oh, yeah."

"Yes, you now have bridge watch. You will be OIC overnight."

OIC was the Officer In Charge. The acting captain, basically. The OIC served as a stand-in captain. Any order must be followed as if you are captain. Only a commander could counter your order, and even they would be required to consult the captain as soon as he was available.

"Howard is angry." he told me. "Very angry. You should probably avoid him unless necessary for the next few days."

"We'll be on different shifts, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"Yes." he said. "Callie, I just want you to know I've been very honored to have you with me, to have a chance to take care of you as you grew up. I'm very proud of you. I never had any children, but you've been the closest thing I can imagine, and I know your parents

would be so very proud of you right now."

"Thank you, Milton."

"Now, do you need any help moving your stuff? I can help out some, if you want. And just take what you need right now, you can get the rest whenever you get the chance."

When we were done talking, I stood to go into my room so I could start packing up things. Milton stood too, and I surprised us both by wrapping him in a big hug and crying against his shoulder.

"You're going to be okay." he said.

"I know." I told him. I sniffled and backed away. "Sorry."

He smiled and let me go off to my room alone. I didn't even know where to begin with the packing. I managed to procure some boxes, then packed the necessary items for the next few days.

I cried again when I toted them into my new quarters. It was so empty. And I wasn't a fan of the beige color that Chester had painted it. I needed to add some pastels, purple or pink, or maybe even a peach or orange.

It was going to be okay. As long as I could sleep, it would be okay. And hey, since it was my own place I could even leave all the lights on at night. That helped. Sometimes.

## Chapter Three

My first night as OIC was rather boring, really. I never knew that the overnight shift moved so slowly. The only time I was called on to make any decisions that night was when security asked about two lieutenants from Engineering who were on the emergency contact list who had been dragged from one of the bars on deck eight. I had them locked up, reasoning that they were probably in no condition to perform repairs if any were needed anyway.

I spent half the night signing off on paperwork. The overnight OIC had the added burden of reviewing security reports for the ship, as well as maintenance reports for Command division, as well as a slew of other departmental reviews all up and down the chain of command. It was all a simple matter of someone in Command who ranked high enough to matter signifying that they saw it, and promise to elevate it to the captain should they deem it worthy of his attention. They were all pro forma, and the most boring thing you could possibly imagine.

When Milton relieved me at eight hundred the next morning he was all smiles, but kept it business as usual as much as he could.

"Lieutenant Monroe," he said, nodding a good morning. "Anything to report from overnight?"

"Captain, there are no outstanding issues, and the only event during the evening which was beyond ordinary is within the log, if you would like to review it." I said as formally as I could muster.

Those were not the exact scripted words the regulations suggested, but I covered everything, and the regulations only made the suggestion as to the form of report, and did not spell out an exacting process.

I continued on, though, to give him a quick rundown of things, including the two lieutenants being arrested. It was the short version of events in all cases, but I let him know what was going on and that I

had it covered.

"Yes, okay." he said, nodding. "How did you get along with your bridge crew?"

I did not expect that question. I felt a half dozen sets of eyes turn on me, awaiting my answer. That included all three of the overnight crew, which were Ensigns Kre, Alonso and Teague, as well as Lewis, Cho and Sokolov, who were relieving them.

"Uh, there were no incidents to report, Captain." I told him awkwardly. I wasn't sure how else to respond. We didn't actually have a lot of call to interact, other than the occasional request to follow the pre-approved course changes and scanning processes.

"Good. I relieve you as OIC, Lieutenant Monroe. Get your breakfast soon if you want any omelets, the cook said there were a limited number this morning."

"Thank you, Milton, I will." I said.

They were out of omelets when I got there. I'm not really an omelet person, anyway–especially since the cook usually added ham–but I asked out of curiosity. Instead I settled on toast with some vegetable spread and some orange juice.

I sat at a table and unfolded my tablet so I could read while eating. I began scanning through the regulations that involve OIC duty, and found that there weren't a lot of specific ones.

"Miss Monroe?" a voice called. I looked up to find Laslo Rodgers standing before me.

"Hi."

"My boss asked me to bring your completed insignia to you, ma'am." he said, and he held out a small metallic insignia for me. "He thought I'd find you here, ma'am."

"Oh, uh," I paused as Shauna sat down across from me. "Thank you." I told him.

"You are welcome, ma'am. I'll let Brock know he was right."

"Oh yeah, I heard about you making second." Shauna said. "Congratulations, Callie. That's a big deal!"

"Thanks," I told her.

Laslo wandered away and Shauna started chattering on about which old movies we should all watch this weekend. It was weird, but all of the ones she brought up were the kind that I am not fond of in

the least. They were all air headed, plotless, and carried only by their crude comedy.

"How many movies are you planning to watch?" I asked.

"As many as we can. We're trying to figure out the snack situation. I think Reva and Marl are bringing popcorn, and I was considering bringing some sandwich things in a cooler. Any chance you can bring anything?"

"Um, maybe some tortilla chips and cheese dip?" I suggested.

"Fab! Wait," she sat down her fork and tilted her head, then glanced down at my tray with the remains of toast on it. "So all this time I thought you were a veg, but you're not? When did that change?"

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"I thought you were a vegetarian?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding.

"Cheese?"

"I eat cheese, Shauna. Just not meat." I explained. "How many people do I need to bring for?"

"Oh, let's see," she said, her eyes rolling up. "Sos about a dozen people I go to school with right now, and maybe four," she said, squinting tightly. "Yeah, four former classmates. So I guess that makes sixteen, total."

"Seventeen then, including yourself?"

"Oh, s'pose so, yeah." she said, nodding.

"Got it. I'll bring plenty." I promised her.

"Oh Jupiter's balls, I'm going to be late for class!" she said shooting to her feet. "Later Cals, I gotta go struggle through a history lecture."

Spending my weekend time off with a bunch of giggling teenagers seemed like such a wonderful idea. In a *not* kind of way. Milton better appreciate all the effort I was putting in to associate with others more. Seriously.

The remaining toast and juice lost their appeal, and I crossed to the recycler to dispose of my food before placing the cup and tray in the sanitizer.

I was just checking my messages on my tablet one last time before folding it up when I noticed a small lectern being positioned at the end of the dining area. There were no social events listed on the calendar or billboard by the entryway, so out of curiosity I pulled up the admin reservation screen to see what was scheduled.

Nothing.

Just great.

This was the kind of thing that I should step in and check on, right? I was second officer, so no more running to the captain with every little thing. I could message Sally, since it was really her responsibility, but that would just be pushing things I could do myself off onto someone else. So I took the initiative, and I approached the young woman who was setting up their display board.

NOCOs. New Order Christian Originalists. They were a very confrontational group, and are known to fly in the face of regulations when it suits them.

I honestly don't know how anyone could ever have been a part of their group. Their beliefs tended toward the idea that all humans should be living on Earth, as it was designed, and in the manner people lived during the time of Christ. Of course that also meant they didn't believe we should be looking for a new home for humans, that we all should have stayed there and awaited our judgment. They also, as hard as I always found it to understand, believed that men are always superior to women, and should always keep a handle on their wives and daughters. How any self respecting woman could join the group I'll never know.

"Pardon me," I said to the young woman. I don't know her name, which is pretty rare on the Freedom.

"Ah, come to join?" she asked. "Praise be." She nodded a low bow.

"No, I'm sorry, but might I inquire what you are doing?"

"We're here to spread the word of TRUTH." she said, giving a special emphasis on truth. "The more people see, the more who will join our cause. One day we will convince the secular leaders of this blasphemous enterprise to turn around and end this affront to the Father."

She said it with such a smile and warmth that it was hard to think about how idiotic it was, how anti-human. They wanted to go back to Earth and die. What could you say to people who firmly believed that?

"Uh-huh," I said, nodding. "Do you have a reservation for this

space?"

"Oh, you would have to take that up with Mister Jonathan." she said, nodding the direction of a middle aged man, who was talking to a small group along the far bulkhead.

"Thank you." I said.

I crossed toward the group, but I had a sinking feeling that it was going to be much more complicated than I initially thought it would be. When the man she had indicated turned his head to the side, I saw that it was Jonathan Wilson. Sally's husband.

Well that blew.

I had no idea he was a member of that group of extremists. If I confronted him, what effect would that have on my career? Sally was a superior officer. She could mess things up for me in a big way. On the other hand, Sally had never come across as the type who would do that.

"Hello there, Calliope." he said, noticing me approach. "How are you this morning?"

"Good. Thank you, Mister Wilson." I said. I looked at the gathered group and sighed. They *were* violating regulations. "May I speak with you for a moment, Mister Wilson?"

"Certainly. What can I do for you?" He asked. The smirk on his face told me he already knew what I was there for.

"If I may say so, your gathering doesn't appear on the event schedule for today. By regulation you are required to schedule these events, and reserve the space, at least three days in advance."

"Oh yes, of course." His smile spread, but it was fake, and I could see the clenching of his right hand as he answered. "I would be happy to speak with the captain about this. Why don't you ask him to speak to me sometime this afternoon?"

"Uh, that won't be necessary, I just need you to clear out of here."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Calliope." he told me, smiling and standing tall to stare me down.

"Mister Wilson,"

"Go fetch the captain, young lady." he said.

"Sir, I don't need to speak to the captain to know this event hasn't been properly scheduled. We have these regulations so everyone is working by the same–"

"Yes, let's take care of that." he told me.

He pulled out his tablet and unfolded it, clicking on the screen to open a voice communication. I was so shocked at him ignoring me that I couldn't figure out what to say next.

"Sal," he said into the tablet. "Reserve a place on the event calendar for our church group for this morning."

"Mister Wilson–"

"And," he said, holding his hand up. "List us as having made that reservation last week."

"You can't do that, Mister Wilson." I told him. "Sally isn't going to do–"

"You're set." Sally's voice rang out.

I stood there, dumbstruck and mouth agape at what had just happened. I just witnessed a senior officer–one I respected and had high regard for–blatantly bow to her husband and violate regulations. Unbelievable.

"I believe if you recheck the event schedule, Calliope, you will find that you are mistaken." he told me. "We have had this space reserved for a week now."

I walked away, certain that the record would show that he was correct. As insane as it was, Sally Wilson had just doctored the record to suit the needs of the NOCO. I could have told the captain about it, but I was sure that there would be no evidence to support me. As far as anyone could tell, the event had been on the calendar for days.

My sinking feeling did not end when I got back to my quarters. I had never witnessed such a thing. And as much as I needed a nap before doing my volunteer work that night, I couldn't sleep. Not even with the Amblipen that Mark had prescribed.

I didn't dare go to the cafeteria during lunch. I knew doing so would only anger me, forcing me to face the fact that there was such a blatant disregard of regulations going on and there was nothing I could do about it.

I felt like a failure. I was the second officer. I should have been able to handle something like that, even if it involved a senior officer. Part of me wanted to go to Milton with it, but I really couldn't bring myself to do it. He might have believed me, but there was no evidence for him to base anything on anyway. I could pull up a copy of the calendar from a backup, but Sally could easily claim that a mixup on

her end kept it from being posted correctly. Like maybe she had forgot to hit submit.

Deck seven held a small restaurant–Patronie's–that served salads and sandwiches. They had the most amazing garden salad, complete with their own unique vinaigrette. They were ridiculously expensive, but worth it. I savored mine, along with a large chamomile lemonade. It was very relaxing, and it cleared my head somewhat.

The long and short of it was that there was nothing I could do about what happened in the cafeteria that morning. In the end, it wasn't a big deal really. I would just let it go. I wouldn't let it gnaw at me for the next week.

At least that's what I told myself.

Like that ever worked.

Milton sent a low priority message to me on my tablet asking me to come see him when I had a few moments to spare. I figured there was no time like the present, and I dropped my dishes in the sanitizer and went to find Milton.

He was in the ready room, trudging through reports on his tablet, with every other screen in the room focused on one of the junior crewmembers. I was intrigued, and let myself into the room and took a seat near him.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant." he said.

"Barely." I mumbled, noting it was straight up twelve hundred. "What's up, Milton?"

"We have a small problem that I would like your help with." he said, leaning back in his seat.

"Yes, sure, okay." I told him, happy to be working on almost anything if it would keep my mind occupied and off of the events from the cafeteria that morning.

"First of all, we'll be rendezvousing with the Atlantic Gale in a few days. I believe current estimates put our link up during–"

"Already?" I asked. "We just left them less than a month ago."

Our sister ship, the Atlantic Gale, was basically a flying hotel. They didn't have the scientific instrumentation that we had, and they couldn't send out probes or scan for threats like we could. They had very limited scanners, just enough to protect them in case something

were to happen to the Freedom and they were all alone, but that was about it. Mostly, Freedom was the scout and science vessel, the Gale carried the resettlement group.

Milton informed me that the rendezvous would occur during my shift as OIC, and he wanted to know if I thought I could handle it. In reality, it was mostly just coordinating with the other ship to make certain everyone was on the same page as they coasted in next to us. I had been on the bridge when it was done, and told him I would handle it.

He then went on to explain the other items he called me in there to discuss. As he did so, he closed down the screens around the room, leaving the main screen with a long list of names that included the crewmembers he had been looking at on the others.

"Our Lieutenant Howard paid me a visit this morning. He had much to say about your promotion over him." he told me. He reached up and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

"He did?" Oh great.

"Indeed. Much of it centered around the fact that you, after so little experience, bypassed a seasoned officer to move into the position you currently hold. He didn't feel it was correct for someone who is senior to you in time in office, as well as age, to be junior to you."

"Oh."

"He made it clear that he cannot serve in such a situation. He made some very good points, and I agreed. So," he sighed and switched to a long list of crew positions that the Gale has. "I am afraid we are requesting a transfer. There is an opening for someone to head their navigation section," he said. "Which in their case is usually a Commander level office, but I spoke with Captain Broussard and she has agreed that it could be filled by a Lieutenant. So, I'm sorry to say, I will need you, in about four days, to travel to the Gale–"

"You're getting rid of me?!" I shouted, feeling betrayed.

"Lieutenant–"

"That is so freakin ridiculous! Because Howard is a butt-munch, I get sent away?"

"If you would listen–"

"This is the stupidest thing you've ever done!" I shouted. I had tears gushing by then. "I hate–"

"Shut up, Callie!" he said harshly.

I fell back in my chair, just then realizing that I had stood in the first place. It was so unfair. Howard was a jerk! Milton was a jerk,

too! I thought he wanted me to succeed. I thought I could trust him!

"I thought… I mean… I trusted you, and you… I…" I stopped, unable to continue.

"I'm asking you to ferry our *former* third officer to his new home on the Gale." he said, raising his hands up in a hold-on motion. "As well as someone from medical. They have a bit of an outbreak of some sort over there, and Dr. Burton has asked if I could send over a supply of vaccine during our next chance to help curtail it. From what I surmise, he would like it carried by someone from medical to insure it is properly handled."

"You… what?"

"I said–"

"You're not getting rid of me?"

He watched me for a moment as I pulled myself together. I was so embarrassed! I couldn't believe I exploded like that. Oh wow, the things I almost said!

"I apologize, Captain." I managed.

"Mister Howard is a lazy, barely competent, disrespectful, bitter man. You are an intelligent young woman, up and coming in her career, with more drive and knowledge in your little finger than Howard has in his entire body. Did you honestly think, even ignoring our personal history, that I would choose that *butt-munch* over you?"

"But… oh." I wanted to sink through the deck.

"Mister Howard made it clear that he couldn't work with you." He leaned forward in his seat, locking eyes on mine. "*I* took that as a statement that he could no longer work with my crew. I would not want someone with so little respect and regard for his superiors and our judgement working for me any longer. He contacted the Gale, Captain Broussard and I worked out the details."

"I'm so sorry, Milton." I told him, working hard to calm myself.

"I'm not. Now, if you think you can command a vessel carrying that *butt-munch*," he said, smiling at my choice of words. "I would like you to head up the mission across to the Gale."

"Of course." I said quickly.

"They have two passengers you will be bringing back with you."

"Of course, Milton."

It was a big step for me. I would be in charge of the large shuttle we used to ferry supplies and passengers back and forth. The

Freedom couldn't physically dock with the Gale, so we got a few thousand meters apart and used the shuttles to go back and forth.

And I'd be in charge of the shuttle mission! That was huge!

"I appreciate your confidence in me, sir. I know this is just a simple ferry trip, but it's a huge opportunity to be in charge of an entire vessel myself."

"It turns out it is not just a simple ferry mission." he said. "Captain Broussard has asked that we take this opportunity to provide a full-scale training exercise. You will be taking members of each division to provide training to the crew of the Gale."

"Wicked!" It wasn't just a quick trip there and back! But I'd be expected to train those people. "Do you think I'm the right perso–"

"Additionally, you will bring back two passengers who are coming to stay with relatives here on the Freedom. I would like you take this opportunity to do a close up flyby of both the Gale and Freedom. Commander Xiang will be going along so she can evaluate what possible damages either ship has and plan any future repairs. I know, for one, she has been very concerned about one of our solar arrays."

"Yes, Sir. This sounds like a long mission?" I said.

"I believe it will be two days on the Gale, possibly a day or two for the once-over of the ships."

"Excellent!"

He seemed pleased at my reaction. He visibly relaxed into his seat and rubbed at his eyes again. I don't think the man ever had enough sleep during the entire time I had known him.

"I would like you to select the members of each division you would like to take along. And remember, you'll have Bao and someone from medical aboard as well. Dr. Burton should be sending you information on who he is sending sometime this evening."

"And I'll have Howard on the way over." I added.

"As well as two passengers on the way back."

"So I'll need to pick no more than another seven crew, other than myself, Bao and the medical crewman."

"Correct."

"I'll get right on it, Milton. I have something I need to do tonight, but I'll take some time and start looking."

"Good. Also start looking at who you might suggest we elevate to replace Mister Howard, if you would. I'd like your opinion on that."

"Yes, Captain."

That was a lot to take in. I was getting to command a huge mission. The shuttle, the Thumper, wasn't exactly a starship, but it was a start.

Yay!!!!!

"I'll send this list of names that I started on as possible replacements for Mister Howard. I'd like you to start your search there. Once you narrow it down to a few, I'd like you to do interviews and make sure they would fit in well in our division, and that they have the knowledge and desire necessary to fulfill the role."

"I will. Thank you, Milton."

"Now, if you will excuse me, I have reports to sign off on."

"Good luck." I told him, giggling a little.

I couldn't stop smiling as I made my way to my quarters. I was so tired, but I needed to get a start on things before I headed to Awareness that night for my volunteer time working with the children.

I sat back on my new sofa, the one that I had Lola from 'Have a Seat' deliver earlier in the day, scrolling down the names on my tablet and taking time to look at each personnel file.

It was an interesting list that Milton compiled. He had Ensign Kre in the mix, and I wondered if he was mistaken about that. She was only an ensign. Ensign to lieutenant–and to third officer especially–was a huge leap. That couldn't be right.

The others made sense, mostly. Chief Logan from Engineering, Chief Thompson, Lieutenant Casey from Administrative, Lieutenant Naing from Science, Chief Welby from Administrative, and Lieutenant Smith from Engineering. It would actually be a step down for Naing, since he was already a Lieutenant First Class. Thompson was already in Command, so he made sense.

There were a few more names, but I was able to cross them all off immediately. I had heard from Bao about one of them already, since he was one of the chiefs who hadn't completed his repairs, and I had worked with a couple of others and seen them in action.

One name stood out, and took me a little by surprise, though it shouldn't have: Anna Wilson. I knew her well, we were in school

together and were assigned as study partners, and we used to be friends. She was super smart, and based on what Bao had to say about her, I knew she was working out very well in Engineering. But Bao also said Anna had some personal problems to work out. I made a notation to speak with Bao about that again.

After reading through personnel records–even the secure ones that only the captain and head of Administrative are supposed to see–I found a good reason to eliminate Naing, who had voiced the career goal of heading up Science, and Welby, who had a domestic violence charge sustained against him a few years ago.

And then it was time to get ready for my volunteer work at Awareness. I took a quick shower and got dressed, adding some quick makeup, before heading down the stairs to deck six.

I was met at the door by Obalesh. His wrinkly head bowed down toward me and he grabbed my arm.

"It is good to see you this evening, Miss Callie. Greetings upon you."

"Hi." I said. "So what do I–"

"This evening you will work with Mister Robby, helping the young ones with their school homework."

"Okay. So where–"

"The homework will be done at the tables." he said, indicating with his hand the large tables that had been set up across the room from up.

"Uncle Obie," a boy of about seven–clearly not his nephew–said, tugging at his jacket.

"Yes, Panda?" Obalesh said to the boy whose name was most definitely not Panda. There weren't any children onboard named Panda.

"I don't want to play games this time." he whined. His eyes kept flittering to me nervously. "Can I do–"

"Ah," Obalesh said, smiling and bending. His lack of height meant he didn't have to bend his frail-looking body far to be at the boy's level. "Then you will go with Callie to do homework."

"No, I'll play–"

"As I thought." he said, ruffling the boy's head. "Go now."

Obalesh stood and turned toward me, gave me a slight bow, then motioned for me to join Robby Duval, Chief from one of our security teams, at the tables to help the children with their work. Then

he turned and took his tiny, quick steps across the room.

I made my way toward the tables, watching as Robby sat beside a boy and pointed at a tablet in front of him. When I got closer I could see that the boy was working on math problems. Simple multiplication.

"Hello, Chief." I said, stopping next to him.

"Oh," he looked up. "Hi, Lieutenant. Congratulations on your promotion, ma'am."

"Um," I said, looking around. I couldn't believe what I was about to say. "Maybe here it's just Callie?" I suggested. "Since we're not on duty and we're here to help the kids."

"Robby, then." he said, smiling. He glanced down and pointed at an equation that the boy had an incorrect answer on.

"So Robby, tell me about Obalesh." I said.

"What do you want to know?" he asked. He stood and started around the table toward a girl who was waving her hand at him.

"The way he speaks," I said. "Does he always–"

"Interrupt you?" he asked. He laughed. "Near as I can tell, ma'am–Callie."

"So what are we supposed to be doing here?" I asked him.

"Just jump in and help out with whatever they need." he said.

I nodded and glanced up and down the tables. Two more children, both at the other table, were waving for some help. I headed over to see what I could do.

"Who are you?" a boy of about seven asked. He shook his head. "I can't figure this one out."

It was a very simple english question, asking what the nouns in the previous sentence were. I was shocked that he hadn't learned this already.

"Okay, well, I'm Callie, and let's see what you have here." I said. I tried to think of how to explain this so that he'd understand it. "What is a noun?" I quizzed him.

"A person or a thing." he replied.

"You forgot place!" the girl added.

"Yes," I said, nodding. "So is there a person, place or thing in this sentence?"

"I don't know." he said, looking perplexed.

"Well repeat the sentence and see." I told him, trying my best

to smile.

"Um," he said. He stared at the screen. "Well, I think there's a… um… is a teacher a person?" he asked.

I couldn't help it, I laughed. I know when I was young I doubted the humanity of the teachers sometimes, and I know others had probably had the same question. I think a lot of kids think of their teachers as either some kind of superhero or some kind of inhuman monster.

"Yes!" I said. "So what does that mean the answer is?"

"Teacher?" he asked.

"Perfect. Now keep working on the next one and see if you can get it."

I left him so I could help the girl with a question she had about a math problem she was working on. She couldn't figure out how to represent the decimal number ten in binary. I helped her figure out binary, and by then the boy needed help again.

About half an hour after I got there Robby took off. He said he had to get ready for his shift at work, and he wished me luck before he left. A few minutes later I glanced over to see Obalesh speaking to someone new: Anna Wilson.

It's amazing how you can not speak to, not see, and not think about someone for weeks, then suddenly they are everywhere.

Okay, so it's not true that I hadn't thought about her. I had just tried not to.

Before I could give it much thought, Obalesh was pointing Anna my direction and she was heading toward me.

I hadn't realized I was standing there watching her as she crossed the room until one of the children swatted at my arm.

"Ow!" I said. I rubbed at my hand and pretending to be hurt. "Don't hit!" I told the little girl, laughing.

"Is this a circle?" she asked. She was tiny, and her worksheet was about identifying shapes.

"Well," I said, pointing out that the outside *was* round. "It's kind of a circle." I explained. "But see how it's different from this one?" I pointed at a circle above it on the screen. "That's a circle,

right?"

"Um-huh." she agreed, nodding vigorously.

"The one down here is called a sphere. It's shaped like a ball, or a planet, or–"

"A orange?" she asked, giggling.

"Exactly!" I said, poking her side. "Do you like oranges?"

"No!" she said. "I *looooove* orangeses! They are my most likedest!"

"Your favorite." I corrected.

"Um-huh. But Momma says I can't have 'em every day because the cows can't grow them back that fastly."

"Oh does she?" I asked, laughing. "Well I'm sure it's true."

By that time Anna had made her way over and had already started helping a girl of about twelve on a her science homework. When she was done she looked up at me, and I realized I was watching her again.

Frizzle!

"Hello Callie." she said. She stood up and moved over next to me, and I felt my breath go out of me.

"H-hi!" I chirped. "I had no id-dea that y-you, um… I mean I wa-wasn't aware that you volunteered." I felt like an idiot. "I mean here! No, what I mean was… meant was–"

"I've been volunteering here for a couple of months now. Dr. Burton recommended it."

"Oh a-are you si-hick?" I asked. "Sorry."

"No, I was just having some personal issues." she said. She glanced away for a moment, then continued. "When did you start volunteering here?"

"Tonight!" I spat out. "I mean, um, this is the, uh, first time."

"Well it's good to have you here. I haven't seen much of you lately."

"I ha-haven't seen much either." I said. "I mean I haven't seen *you* much either." I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I se-seem to be a tied tongue little tonight."

Anna, as well as all the children, laughed at me. But she smiled, too, mesmerizing me for a moment. Deity's eyes, she always had such a wonderful smile.

"I mean," I said, taking a deep breath to calm myself and trying not to feel the heat rising in my face. "I seem to be a little

tongue tied tonight."

"I noticed." she said, laughing again.

I was rescued from more embarrassment when Anna was asked for more science help. I went back to helping kids with their math and history questions, trying not to get too embarrassed whenever I caught Anna looking my way.

The time went by quickly, and children started being picked up by their parents. Before I knew it, all the children were gone. That left Anna and me standing there, waiting in case more came.

"Young Miss Callie," Obalesh said, approaching. "You were to leave nearly one hour ago."

"Oh," I said, glancing at the clock on the bulkhead display. "I wasn't aware it was quite this–"

"How was your first night?"

"It was fun, I reall–"

"I am heartened to hear that, young Callie." he said. "You will go now, and you will come again two evenings from now."

"I would lov–"

"Thank you for your assistance to the children this evening. Sleep well."

"Oh, actually I have to go on–"

He turned and hurried away, taking dozens of quick, short steps, before I could finish explaining that I had duty that night.

"What is up with him always cutting people off?" Anna asked.

"I don't know. But this place is very nice, and seems to be doing good things, so if interrupting people all the time is the worst thing about him, I'm willing to give him a pass on it."

"I should probably go as well." she said. "It was wonderful to see you again." she said, looking away. "I'll be here the day after tomorrow too, so maybe I'll see you again?"

"Definitely. But… are you maybe going to Shauna's movie night?"

"She's having a movie night?" she asked.

"So, uh, she didn't invite you? Sorry, uh, but I'm sure it'd be okay if you came along."

"I'm not sure if–"

"No, you should come!" I said quickly. "Please come?"

I felt dumb for being so insistent. But I just wanted her there. I

missed her. We had always been friends, and I hadn't seen her or thought of her… okay, just *seen* her, for a long time.

"Well… okay, it's a date." she said, then quickly added "Not like a date date,"

"No, mo-hore like an… appointment!" I suggested.

"Exactly!" she agreed, nodding.

"Exactly!" I said.

"Well, um," She turned and picked up her tablet, folding it up as she shoved it toward her pocket. "Goodnight."

"You too!" I told her.

I nearly bumped into her as I was rushed toward the door at the same time she was rushing to leave. She paused and let me go first, and we both laughed. I felt myself turning red.

I was finally able to breathe well again when I made it back to my quarters. It was ridiculous. That girl sure had me flummoxed, for some reason. I didn't even know why, I just thought it was maybe because I'd always looked up to her.

I pulled my tablet out to send a message off to Shauna, letting her know we'd have another person. But when I unfolded my tablet, the screen split open.

I sighed and leaned back against my door. Terrific.

I turned on the tablet, hoping it would still work well enough for me to get a quick message out. I was in luck, and was able to send out the message, at least.

I hurried down to Engineering, hoping someone there had an extra tablet around.

"What are you doing here at this time, kiddo?" Bao asked. She glanced at her tablet. "It's almost time for your shift, isn't it? Is this an official visit?"

I held up my tablet and she swore. Loudly. In two languages.

"What are *you* doing here so late?" I asked her.

"Cracking the whip on my wayward crews." she said. "I was just about to head off to bed, actually."

"Oh, go ahead, I can take care of this."

"No, it's fine. Let's see if we can find another tablet for you."

She led me toward her office, stopping along the way to bark at some of her crew because they weren't doing what they were told. We reached her office and she stepped inside.

"I've hidden a couple of extras in here," she explained. "So they don't disappear. Here we are."

She turned it on to check it, then handed it over to me. I signed off the old tablet and cleared its memory, then handed it over to her.

"Damn things!" she said, slamming the old one into a bin of other broken tablets. "We're having a hard time making the flexible plastic for these screens now. The new ones are breaking in less than three months because the plastic just won't hold up. This one I gave you is one of the last of the old ones. The other spare is staying here for when my tablet goes."

"Why so much trouble making the plastic?" I asked, as I signed onto the new tablet and reloaded my personal settings.

"We don't have what we need to synthesize some of the polymers needed. We've had to come up with alternatives, and they don't always work as well."

"I will try to make this one last, then." I said, raising the new tablet up.

"Hopefully it'll be good for a while. I have someone working on a design that doesn't have a flexible screen, where the screen is in two parts that separate when it folds, but it isn't ready yet. And even then, people are going to have to learn to be easier on them, because the hard screen will be a lot less forgiving. Anyway, have a good shift, I'm going to bed."

"Goodnight."

Bao took the lift to go up to her quarters at midship. I preferred the stairs, and took them up to deck ten, to the bridge. I took over as OIC and settled in to view logs and keep an eye on things.

Sometimes there wasn't a lot to do on overnight shift. That was one of those nights.

I kept busy by coming up with a list of questions I need answered by each person on the list of replacements for Howard.

Milton wanted me to interview them, so I needed to prepare for that.

I had a few questions I needed to ask myself about each one, also. Like could *I* work with them. It may be unfair to block someone's career simply because I didn't get along with them, but I had earned my position, and that was one benefit of it. A captain wouldn't pick someone as his first officer if he couldn't work with that person. Or keep someone on as third, as Milton had shown with Lieutenant Howard.

There was really only one person on the list who I was worried I might not be able to work with, and I didn't know how much of a problem it could be. A new third would not be on the overnight shift, I know. She would probably end up as Milton's right hand, like I had always been.

Still, could I work with her if it came to it? It wasn't the relaxed atmosphere of a meeting room in a non-denominational church. I was usually able to talk to her just fine when we were studying together, mostly because I had school work to focus on, and I knew what I was doing. But on duty I'd have things to focus on if we were working together, too. But what about the slow times. Would I get all flummoxed and not be able to talk?

I still didn't quite understand why I let myself get like that around her anyway.

It was completely academic until after I interviewed everyone and come up with a recommendation for Milton, though. And even then, he'd have to approve my recommendation. Still, Bao did give her high praise, and I knew she was an excellent officer.

I distracted myself that night by pulling up those troubling scans again. There was something there, but I couldn't tell what. Well, in reality there was *nothing* there, but that bothered me. There was nothing where there should be something. Subsequent scans had shown the exact same thing, though, so it didn't seem to actually be problems with the scanners, as Ensign Cho believed.

I changed screens, loading the scans I had Ensign Merriweather do. I couldn't find anything in them at all. At least nothing we hadn't seen before.

Except I did.

Just as I was reaching to close the file, I noticed something. I switched back to the previous image, and then the one prior to that.

"Ensign, uh," I had to look up to see who I was actually working with, my brain had totally blanked on which crew were on duty with me. "Teague," I completed. "I'm sending some coordinates to you. Please do a full spectrum scan there, if you will. And then repeat the scan in one half hour, as well."

"Ma'am?" he said. "I've got the coordinates. Is this a priority, Lieutenant?"

"I would like it done, yes." I replied, irritated that he'd question my order.

"Oh of course, ma'am. It's just that at the moment the scanners are busy with scheduled interval scans, and if I interrupt that I will need to restart from the beginning. I was only wondering if you would like me to wait the seven minutes until those have completed, ma'am?"

"I see, Ensign." I said. I needed to stop assuming people were being jerks to me, I reminded myself. "Please complete the scheduled scans first, Mister Teague."

"Yes ma'am."

In due time Teague was able to run my scans, and then I had the horrible experience of waiting the thirty minutes for the second run to complete. I kept wanting to ask '*are they done yet?*', but it seemed as if it would come off as unbecoming an officer.

When they were complete, though, I sat to compare. After switching back and forth, and getting annoyed, I finally appropriated the main viewer, and I redirected the video from my tablet to that screen, giving enough screen space to show half a dozen images at a time, all blown up to a reasonable size.

"Sorry, everyone, but I need to use this for a moment. I'll let you go back to your route plotting in a moment, Mister Alonso."

"Yes ma'am, please take your time." he replied.

I ran my eyes over the images. It was clear. Or not. I knew I wasn't seeing things, but maybe I was reading more into it than I should be.

"Ensign Kre," I said. I pointed at one of the images. "Do you see this shadow here?" I asked her, pointing at the shadow being cast

upon the gas giant.

"What about it, Lieutenant?" she asked. She appeared to be perturbed with me.

"Does it look the same in this image?" I continued, pointing to the next image in the series. "Or this one?" I pointed to a third.

"I don't understand why you're asking."

"What causes a shadow to move across a planet?" I asked her.

"First of all, if I'm not mistaken those are radiation scans, so I don't know if shadow is the proper term." she said.

"No, it is." Teague told her.

"And second of all," Kre continued. "It is obvious that the object casting the *shadow* is moving. So?"

"What do you think this shows, Alonso?" I cajoled.

"I'm sure I don't know, ma'am." he answered promptly.

"Guess."

"A planet?" he suggested.

"A moon." Teague offered. "I think it's a moon, ma'am."

"My thoughts exactly, Mister Teague."

"And again I say: So?" Kre said.

"That's the real question, Miss Kre." I told her. "That's the big question, of course. Mister Teague, can you get me another scan, and this time do a search for biologicals?"

"Sure thing, Miss Monroe. I'd be happy to, ma'am."

It was nearly the end of the shift before the scan for biologicals was completed. I was just looking at the data as Milton came in.

"I'm ready to relieve you, Lieutenant." he told me.

"Yes, Milton. I sign OIC over to you." I said, not turning away from the screen to look at him.

"What are you so busy with?" he asked, sliding into his seat.

"We ran a scan for biologicals in the area near that gas giant." I explained.

"And why, may I ask, would you order such an energy consuming scan without consulting me, Miss Monroe?"

Oh. Well, yeah, it did eat a *lot* of power to do those particular scans. We had a finite supply of that, and the power consumed by that scan would probably keep the environmental systems going for a week.

"Earlier scans showed the possibility of a moon, Milton." I told him. I sent copies of those scans to his console. "I, uh, had a gut feeling that we might find something. Sorry, I probably should have

asked first."

"Was there?" he asked. "Any biologicals?"

"The scans weren't very clear, but I *think* so." I told him, actually handing him my tablet this time.

"This could be interpreted a lot of ways." he said.

"I know, but I just…" I sighed. "*Milton*, I just have a feeling, okay. It's not a lot to go on, but can we launch a probe?"

"Lieutenant," he said. "That's a lot to do for this amount of data. Not to mention the fact that we'll be well past before we get any significant data back from this probe."

"But if we find something we can turn around! Wouldn't it be worth it to resupply our–"

"Turning isn't something we can do so easily." he said. "Which you know. But I'll talk to Science and Engineering and have them prepare a probe."

"Really?" I asked. "I mean, not to argue, but I don't need to present better evidence than that? You're just launching it based on my intuition?"

He switched his screen over and started typing out a message to Science and Engineering. Liam was going to love this.

"Callie, you are the only person I've ever met that makes me almost believe in ESP."

"Really?"

"I said almost." He laughed. "I can recall more than a few times that your gut feelings turned out to be right. We'll see how it works out this time."

"Thank you." I told him.

"Now go!" he said, pretending to be stern. "You look half dead, get some sleep."

"Yes, captain." I said, smiling.

But sleep wasn't going to come. Instead I laid in my bed, thinking about the times my gut feelings had worked out. Like the day my parents died.

## Chapter Four

After giving up on sleep for the day, I got up and reviewed the list of crew who may replace Howard. I still couldn't figure out who I should interview. Well, I really knew who I *should* be interviewing, but I just didn't know how that would work out. But it wouldn't be fair to block her, either.

I closed all the records down. It was hard. Very, very hard. I didn't know how people decided who should and shouldn't get a job. I hadn't even started yet on choosing my away crew for the trip across to the Gale.

I zipped out a note to each division commander, asking them to suggest two members of their respective divisions to do the training on the Gale. I folded my tablet, went into my bedroom for some shoes, and by the time I came back I had a reply from Mark.

*Would like to send Ensign Switzer and Lieutenant Gershawn. Room for one more? Audry Billups would love to go. She has never been off ship, and she has a distant cousin on the Gale she talks with a lot, and I know she'd like to see her.--Doctor Commander Mark Burton*

Oh great, he wanted to send Colton Switzer. That was just wonderful. Maybe he was a fairly competent nurse, I didn't know, but I couldn't stand him for that long. But I guessed I would have to. Maybe I could order him to stop hitting on me?

*I'll have to see what I can do, vis-à-vis Miss Billups. Putting together crew right now, not sure of space. I'll let you know. Thanks, Mark!--Second Officer, Lieutenant Callie Monroe*

I decided the rest of the day could wait until I had something in my stomach, and I headed to the cafeteria for something to warm me up inside and wake my brain up.

Instead I had cereal and orange juice. Again.

As I munched on my whole grain o's and sipped my orange juice, I ran down my edited list of possible new third mates. There were really only five that I would have considered ready for the job, and only three of those were truly acceptable to me.

I sent off a message to Sally, asking for a detailed review of Lieutenant Casey and for his schedule, so I could set up an interview. I sent a similar inquiry to Bao about Anna, though I still felt a little uneasy about that one. I didn't need to send an inquiry for Thompson, I actually sat in on his last review, and I could ask Milton any additional question about him that I needed to know.

After breakfast I walked up the passage, to the main office where Thompson's group should be working, and leaned in. The seven employees were seated at their workstations around the perimeter of the room, including Chief Thompson, who was at the back.

The room was a bit of a mess that day, and I made a mental note of that. It was a minor thing, but it was a small check against the chief. If he couldn't keep a workspace that size organized then he either did not have a good handle on his people, or he was not organized well enough to begin with, and may struggle with even more data to keep track of.

"Good morning, Chief." I said, stepping beside him at his desk.

"Lieutenant Monroe," he said, nodding. "How are you this morning?"

"Good, Chief. If you don't mind my asking, how is your current workload?"

"Oh, it's not too bad. A little slow, actually."

"Glad to hear it." I said, trying *not* to glance around at the mess around the office, and especially on his desk. "Would you have time, possibly around thirteen hundred, to talk privately with me?"

"Certainly, Miss Monroe." he replied, finally making it to his feet. "Can I ask what this is about, ma'am?"

"Let's keep that between us for now, Chief. I'll see you in the captain's ready room at thirteen hundred."

"I'll be there, ma'am."

I turned and exited the room, noting every messy detail as I went. He didn't seem to even notice it. At least he didn't seem to be upset about the fact. Messy did not mean he would be a bad officer,

but I worried it could be a hint at a lack of discipline.

I got messages from Liam and Sally with recommendations for which crewmembers I should take. I didn't really see any reason to not go along with any of the their recommendations so far. Well, other than Mark's recommendation of Colton Switzer, but I would go along with it.

That gave me seven, other than me. Well, nine really. I needed to count Howard and Bao. That was already a fairly full load, and I still didn't have Bao's recommendations.

I made my way down the stairs, aft to Engineering. Inside I found a large number of staff going through what appeared to be a severe dressing down by Bao. She was really stripping their aft ends.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Lieutenant." Bao said, finally noticing me. She turned her attention back to one group of her staff. "Please, for the sake of my lazy Aunt Abby's fuzzy eyebrows, would you all please be so kind as to teach this sorry ass lot the proper techniques for filling out reports, as well as walk them through, *again*, the proper order of priorities on a night shift?"

There was a chorus of "Yes, ma'am, Commander." from what is apparently the 'good' group. At least I thought they were. Anna is a part of that group, and Bao had great praise for her before, anyway.

Bao waved for me to follow, and she stalked toward her office. I started to follow her, but almost stumbled when I heard a muffled "Hi, Callie." from the group. I glanced over to see Anna smiling, but she turned toward the group of 'not good' staff and began talking to them.

The fact that the little whispered hi had made my heart flutter and my feet freeze in place was unsettling to me. I couldn't let myself get all weird like that.

Bao waited for me in her office. When I got there she was sitting behind her desk, giving me a 'hurry up' look. I entered and closed the door behind me.

"What do you need, kiddo?" she asked me.

"I'm considering interviewing Chief Wilson for our open third spot. Any input you have would be greatly appreciated."

"What do you need to know?" she asked, snapping at me. She blew out a breath. "Anna is my best employee right now. Do I want to lose her? Hell no! Do I think she deserves a shot to advance? Damn right I do. Plus, I think she'd be fantastic command material. Wouldn't surprise me if she wound up in charge one day."

"You said before that she had some personal problems to work out?"

"Yes," she said, narrowing her eyes on me. "I don't *think* they'd get in the way of her being an effective third officer."

"I can't recommend a depressed crewmember to Milton, Bao. As much as her file shows that she would be more than qualified, I'm concerned."

"I don't believe her problems have anything to do with work, Callie." she said. She sipped from a coffee cup. "And I think she'll eventually work out her other issues."

"What are the other issues? And don't give me that load about taking care of your own people, because this is *my* responsibility now, and I need to know this before I can proceed."

"I don't know, exactly. I can guess, but I can't be certain." she explained. "And don't forget your rank, *Lieutenant*." she added.

"Milton gave me this task, and I'm taking it very seriously." I told her.

"As should be." she said, nodding.

She stared at me for a moment, and I did my best to maintain eye contact. I lost that particular staring contest, I'm ashamed to admit. She sipped at her coffee some more and finally leaned back and looked up at me.

"She's having some disagreements with her parents, for one thing."

"At leas..." I started to say 'at least she has parents', but thought better of it. "At least that isn't work related. Anything else?"

"Well," she shrugged and glanced to the side. "I believe she is not happy with her dating life. She hasn't said anything, but I know the signs."

She knew the signs? I've known Bao my entire life, my mother and her were best friends before she died, and Bao spent nearly every evening in our quarters. I'd *never* known Bao to show the least romantic interest in anyone. What would she would know about dating?

"Okay. Well, I suppose I need to know her schedule, and I'll

need your permission to interview her for the position." I said.

"I'll forward her schedule to you, and you can interview her anytime you need. If she's on duty when you want to interview her we can do our best to cover for her so we can spare her for an hour or two."

"Thanks."

"Is that all, kiddo?" she asked. "I need to get back out there and kick more ass."

"I need your recommendation for the training mission."

"Oh, right," she said, sipping at her coffee again. "Well, perhaps it would be a good chance for you to see her in action. I'd say you should take Anna Wilson."

"A-anna?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, it's just…" Just what? "It could get awkward. I mean if I don't recommend her for third."

"Chief Wilson is a big girl, she'll understand."

"Right. Okay then. I'll just run my list past Milton then, and I'll tell him about Anna… about how you recommend her so highly. I mean assuming I select her after interviewing, of course."

"Of course." she said.

"Thank you, Bao."

"You're welcome, kiddo. Enjoy your day."

"Thanks, you too!"

I zipped a message off to Milton, listing the proposed crew for the away mission. Myself, Bao, Anna, Ensign Switzer, Dr. Gershawn, Audry Billups, Lieutenant Gordon Mehmet, Chief Jerry Vanwinkle, Ensign Ailanna Pok, Lieutenant Edward Smith, and Lieutenant Howard would all be on the ship heading out.

And We'd be leaving Howard behind.

Could I say yay loud enough?

On the return trip there would be two passengers, and that would bring us up to twelve onboard.

I returned to my quarters to prepare for my interview with Chief Thompson. I had a lot of question to ask him, but I narrowed my list down to the most important. I needed to add a few since seeing his office earlier in the day.

When the time came, I made my way up the passageway and

entered the bridge. Milton was in the midst of going over some scans with a couple of ensigns at the front. I waited patiently behind them until there was a break in the conversation.

"Milton," I said. "I'm going to–"

"Ah, Lieutenant," he said, smiling. "I was preparing to send a reply, approving your crew selection, before my attention was needed elsewhere."

"Oh. Thanks." I told him. "I'm going to use the ready room to interview a candidate, if you have no objections."

"Would you like me to sit in on the interview?" he asked.

"I can handle it." I told him, assuming he'd insist on sitting in on it anyway.

"Let me know how it goes." he said, nodding.

"I will." I told him, surprised that he was letting me do it without his oversight.

By the time I made it to the doorway to the waiting room Chief Thompson was waiting at the entrance to the bridge. I motioned him in, intentionally not saying anything so as not to call attention to the assembled crew on the bridge.

"Good afternoon, Captain." Chief Thompson said loudly, destroying my plan.

"Mister Thompson." Milton replied, nodding.

Thompson and I entered the ready room and took seats at the far end of the table. He seemed very uncomfortable, and had a look of confusion on his face, but he sat quietly. Not completely upright, but quietly.

"This will take a while, Chief." I said. "Would you like to get some water or coffee before we begin?"

"No, Lieutenant. I'm good." He said, beginning to slouch further into the chair.

"Very well. Please tell me about your relationship with the crew under you, if you would."

"Oh we get along great, ma'am." His smile drained from his face and he sat up a little. "Why, did someone say something?"

"Not at all. Do you know why I asked you here, Chief?"

"Not the slightest." He slumped down again. "I assumed you'd explain. I didn't really have anything else to do this afternoon, anyway."

"Good." I said.

I took my tablet from my pocket and unfolded it, pulling the stylus out so I could make notes more easily. I opened up the list of questions I had for him, and I made a note at the top about what time I interviewed him, his general lazy attitude at the beginning, and his comments on having nothing else to do.

"How do you handle it when one of your subordinates doesn't complete an assigned task?" I began.

"Oh the girls always get around to it eventually, you know? I try to cut them some slack."

"And things get done on time?"

"Well," he shrugged. "Yeah, why wouldn't they? Did someone complain, Lieutenant?"

"No, Chief Thompson, we haven't had any complaints yet. Let me ask you something else: If a superior gave you a command that you didn't agree with, how would you respond?"

"I always follow orders, ma'am!" he said, getting angry. "If someone said I didn't they are filthy–"

"Nothing like that." I told him. "If you were to disagree with an order, would you question the superior? Would you offer alternatives, or explain your resistance?"

"That would be insubordination, ma'am."

I made notes. If he wouldn't question or explain his superiors then I didn't think he'd work out as third. Personally, I thought a captain would need the crew to question them if they think the captain is wrong. Sometimes there is data that the captain, or any superior, doesn't have that would change the order.

My interview only lasted about half an hour, and I never did get around to explaining exactly why I was questioning him. By the end he was looking very nervous, though. And from the responses he gave, I couldn't figure out if he thought there had been some complaint filed against him and his crew or if he thought I was doing a surprise review.

I dismissed him and glanced over all my accumulated notes. I would be going over it with Milton, of course, but there was no way I wanted that guy getting any more responsibility than he already had. I really thought we need to keep a closer eye on him from then on, because I was not sure he was handling the position he had very well, either.

I skipped lunch, and my stomach was feeling it. I made my way to the cafeteria and got a nice salad, adding a banana to help fill me up. It didn't do the job, but I was going to have a lot of snacks that evening, assuming they brought things I could stand to eat.

I dropped my dishes in the recycler, then headed out to get ready for the night. I was going to wear one of my relaxed dresses, and I thought for a change I may leave the second officer insignia behind. I didn't really need it with the group I would be with. Hopefully.

It took a very long time for me to redo my makeup after changing clothes. I learned long ago that nothing I could do would make me look older. I always wished it would, but it didn't. All that ever happened is that I looked like a little girl trying to look older.

Instead, what works for me is making every detail immaculate. If I was careful, I could look somewhat sophisticated. I was never going to stop looking so young, it just didn't work, so that was the best I could do. I mean I thought I was pretty, but there were a lot of pretty girls out there. So what? I wanted to be striking. Beautiful.

Who was I trying to look beautiful for? I wondered. I had said, over and over again, that I would never have a relationship. I'd always thought I worked so hard to look my best because I wanted to make a good impression on every person I met. But I didn't think I really wanted that, to be alone all my life and never have love. That didn't solve the problem, though. Wanting love and actually having feelings for someone were different things entirely, and I had never felt the slightest tinkling for anyone.

That wasn't true, and I knew it. I had to stop lying to myself. I knew I had felt… well, *something* for someone, and had for a while. Just not someone attainable.

I had managed to keep her mostly off my mind for a while, but she kept turning up in everything lately. And I would be seeing her in just a few minutes.

Keep it together, Monroe!

I headed into the passageway, double checking the rec room number Shauna sent me. One of the smaller ones, number seven. I was halfway to the theater on deck eight when I realized I hadn't gotten

any snacks yet. I sent off an order for tortilla chips and cheese, wincing when I realized the delivery fee was going to be three times the cost of the items.

Shauna met me at the door to the rec room. She was waiting outside, greeting people in the passageway.

"Hey girl!" she said, thrusting her arms around me. "So glad you made it, Cal!"

"Yeah, uh,"

"Gilbert's inside already." she said softly, shooting me a wink.

I nodded, not wanting to go through that whole conversation again, and moved past her and into the rec room. Gilbert was there, as was Carlene Shotzky, Aaron Jones, Ellie Cohen, and three others I didn't know. They all looked a little surprised to see me. Gilbert gave me a rather sickening smile that made me cringe.

"Hey there." Gilbert said, stepping over near me.

"Hi everyone." I said, looking at the group and away from him.

"It's great to see you, Lieutenant." Carlene said.

"Just, uh, Callie tonight." I said. I glanced at her uniform, seeing the recruit insignia on her shoulder. I wasn't aware that she had signed up.

"You look taller than I remember." Ellie said, laughing. "Or maybe it's because I haven't seen you in forever. What's new with you, Callie?"

"Nothing much, I guess." I said, shrugging.

The whole conversation was uncomfortable for me. I had never been very good at small talk with my peers. It always made me so uncomfortable that I usually avoided it. But the whole event kind of pushed us to talk like that.

"Nothing much?" Carlene asked. "Did you know she is second officer now?"

"Wow, impressive!" Ellie said, smiling.

She turned away from me and started talking with some of the others. Pretty much everyone except Gilbert turned away from me. He just kind of stood there and leered at me. Creep.

Before long others started showing up, Reva and Marl I recognized, some of the others I didn't. Within five minutes there were

over twenty people in the room. That was a lot more than Shauna told me were going to be here.

And then Anna showed up, her warm smile moving over the crowd. And I am sure it was my imagination, but I felt like her smile lingered on me a little longer, and there was a little more twinkle in her eyes. Maybe it was only because we had recently spent time together volunteering to help the little kids, or maybe it was because we used to be study partners.

I was probably just imagining things.

With a flutter from my stomach I realized just how much I wished I wasn't just imagining it, though.

I was about to speak to Anna when a delivery man showed up and asked for me. I had to receive the delivery and scribble my name across his tablet.

There was a table along one bulkhead with snacks on it. It was covered in cupcakes, cookies of ten types, pretzels, potato chips, tortillas with cheese, salsa and guac, along with tiny dough covered meats. I wouldn't be trying those last ones.

Shauna glanced around the room, declared that everyone was here, invited people to get some food and drinks, and went about reserving a movie.

Most people grabbed plates full of snacks and a cup, but Anna hung back and moved near me as the space emptied.

"How are things going tonight?" she asked.

She was wearing a pair of black leggings, a long sweater, and some high heel boots. Her wavy blond hair was down, which was unusual for her. It was usually in a ponytail. She had on makeup, too, which was *extremely* unusual for her. But she didn't need makeup.

"Far is good so." I said. I sighed and closed my eyes. Why was I such an idiot? "So far so good." I corrected.

"Yes," she said, holding in a laugh. "*Far is good so* for me too."

"Sorry," I said, shrugging. "Talking is not my strong suit."

"I don't know, I kind of like it when you talk."

She blushed a little–probably just sympathetic embarrassment *for* me–then nudged my arm and pointed toward the snack table.

"Having anything?"

"Um," I said, thinking carefully before talking so I didn't make even more of a gorp of myself. "Sure, why not?"

Nothing at the table looked good. Okay, *no food* looked good. I was actually hungry, though, so I took a plate and began filling it. Chips, a couple of cookies, and some nachos with a cheese and bean salsa poured over them. I turned to go find a seat, and Anna was looking down at my plate.

"You don't want that." Anna said. Her hands were full, but she nodded at my plate. "The sauce has meat in it."

"What?" I said, glancing down. "Oh. Thanks."

"Here, I'll take it." she said, sliding her plate next to mine and sliding the chips and sauce off onto her plate. "I was going to get some anyway."

I added more tortilla chips–this time with no sauce–and contemplated the fact that she knew I was a vegetarian. I didn't remember ever mentioning it to her. Even if I had, it would have been months or years before. It was nice that she bothered to remember, I guess.

I sat next to Anna. There was an open seat next to her, and I didn't think she would mind. And then the movie started and Shauna dimmed the lights with her tablet.

The movie was an ancient one called *Molded Fried Onions*. It was strange. I had seen the movie before, there's only the tiniest reference to onions at all.

It was preceded by an animated short called *Tiny People In Dungeons*. I hadn't seen it before, but it was interesting. The tiny people, the Lilites, were kidnapped from their village and held in a dungeon by a maniacal scientist, who was taking them away one by one, sending them up a tube, to do who-knows-what to them.

In the end, they escape their cells, and when the scientist came to get the next one, they all attacked him. They managed to overthrow him, but one Lilite–Willard–gets squashed by the falling scientist and dies. All that is left of Willard is his pink shoe. The Lilites dragged the

scientist back to their village, coated him in plaster, and erected him above their cemetery as a monument and a reminder that even little people can accomplish big things when they work together.

It was all done humorously, and the animation was very cute. We all laughed, and I realized how good it felt to do that. I hadn't laughed that much in a very long time. I also was reminded how nice Anna's laugh was.

I was hopeless.

The first feature didn't turn out very good, and the second one elicited groans from everyone because it was so awful. Some twentieth century thing about found video footage of people wandering around in woods that were haunted by a witch. It was really terrible.

"I can't imagine people watched shit like that." Aaron said, shaking his head.

"Fucking dreadful." Shauna agreed. "Sorry guys."

"Well what's next?" Ellie asked. "Something funny?"

"I'm going to take off. I'm exhausted after waking up at three hundred." Carlene said. "Abdul will be wondering where I am before long, anyway."

"Me too." four other people chimed in.

I assumed they agreed that they needed to leave, not that Abdul would be waiting for them. Well, unless they had some kind of strange relationship going on there.

We said our goodbyes, and watched as the small group made their way into the passageway. And then there was chatter about what movie they would like to see next.

Except from Shauna. She seemed a little upset.

"Is there something wrong, Shauna?" Anna asked her, just loud enough for Shauna and I to hear.

"Well no, not a thing." she said. She sighed. "I'm all zeroed and my parents are being assholes and putting the squeeze on."

"Uh," was Anna's response.

"I got it," I said.

I unfolded my tablet and keyed in the code for the room. It wouldn't let me get into anything at first, showing the room was

already reserved until twenty four hundred. I used my admin access to override that, and I paid for an additional four hours and added two movies.

While I had my tablet out I verified my credit balance, noting that it was dwindling. I got paid almost double what an ensign made, but I still ran out at the end of the month sometimes. On Freedom everyone was allotted living space, food, healthcare, and any other necessities in life. You really only had to spend money on niceties, like better food or clothing, or bigger quarters. Still, it seemed to be difficult for some people to get by on their low salaries.

"Cool," Shauna said, nodding. "Grass."
"No problem."

Anna gave me a questioning look and tilted her head toward Shauna, moving her eyes toward Shauna and back to me. I shrugged. I guessed that she was trying to figure out how I understood half of what Shauna said. She could be kind of confusing, but sometimes I just understood people, even if they weren't making a lot of sense.

Twenty minutes into an end of the world, science fiction type movie that was so *not* sciencey, just all fiction, my tablet beeped loudly and repeatedly. Everyone swivelled my way, and I almost dropped my drink as I hurried to pull my tablet out to silence it and to see what the emergency alert was.

*Reactor network down. Can't access controls. Please report to Engineering ASAP–Bao*

"Gotta go!" I said, jumping up. Everyone stood. "Oh, uh, just stay and enjoy your movie. It's nothing to worry about."

I hurried down the passageway toward Engineering. I was almost there before I realized that mine weren't the only hurried footsteps that I heard. I glanced back to see Anna hurrying along behind me.

"Sounds like trouble." she said, motioning me on.

I didn't argue, just hurried into Engineering, back to the control room. Bao was there, shouting out directions to crewmembers. She spotted me and Anna, and she motioned us over to a terminal.

"Good, you're here!" she spat. "We've lost control of the damn ion reactors and can't get back in."

"Start from the beginning." I said. I took a seat and dived into the logs as she spoke.

"My frazzing staff thought it would be a great idea to enable gimbal steer, and it's jammed now." she explained.

"Gimbal steer? Why Gimbal steer?"

"We had a minor course correction required." she said. From the corner of my eye I saw her wipe her face with her hands. "The damn asshats locked down all the maneuvering thrusters for repair."

"All of them?" Anna asked. "At the same time?"

"And *why* would they do that?" I asked, trying to reroute the network so they could get access to the runaway reactor."

"Hell if I know." she said.

"Right before a course correction?" Anna asked. She sounded angry.

"Yeah," Bao said. "If I don't die from stress over this, I'll probably get gray hair."

"Why didn't you just reboot the system?" Anna asked.

"Like I didn't think of that, Chief?" she said. "Whole thing has us locked out. We can't so much as get a status reading. We know the main engines are at gimbal lock to the port side only because we're still turning and because we can see the gases escaping out from the aft observation deck."

"So we're at full lock *and* the reactors are still applying power?" Anna asked. "Wait, tell me they weren't running up to full when it locked you out."

"Shouldn't matter." I said.

"Yes." Bao told her.

"Well, I can't get into the system from here." I explained. "I can see, based on passive scans, that we're past max capacity on the reactors already. The safety should have kicked them out by now."

"Same crew had half the reactors down working on upgrades last week." Bao told me. "Wanna bet when we get a chance to check that they somehow managed to disable the safety?"

"And they're *all* going full now?" Anna asked. "That's not the way it's supposed to be done."

Okay, I was maybe misleading everyone back in the rec room when I said there was nothing to worry about. Oh sure, if it came down to it we could jettison the entire power unit, as well as the main ion engines. But to do that we'd have to shut off most of the power to the ship, other than life support and navigation, and without those we'd be floating along forever, with no ability to refine materials for

more fuel, and no power for the farms and recycling centers. Our batteries would carry us a few days, but not long.

There was supposed to be an emergency shut down for the reactors that provided the majority of power for the ship. You were also not supposed to use the main engines for steering except in extreme cases, like when making major turns or if the thrusters were out. To top that off, you *never* routed power from a reactor to the main ion engines while ramping up the reactor, specifically because it could blow things out and break things.

"I can get to the relays right before the reactor controls," I explained. "But the network from there on seems to be dead. You may have to manually shut down the reactors."

"If we hit the kill switch it takes a week before we can prep them to bring them back up. Any other ideas?"

"Sorry Bao." I said, shaking my head.

"Well balls!" she shouted, slamming her hand down. "Gates," she called out. A scared looking Chief poked his head in.

"Yes, Commander?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"Get your crew in radiations suits, in case, and get down there and hit the kill switch on all of the reactors."

"Yes Commander."

"And Wilson is in charge." she told him. Then to Anna "You're on, Chief."

"Yes, Commander Xiang." Anna replied.

What were the odds that four separate network paths, and their redundant loops, all went down at the same time? I couldn't get through with any of them. Something was off about this.

"Thanks for the help, kiddo." Bao said. "None of our sys people could figure things out."

The sys people she was talking about were all in the room with us, at different terminals. I could feel their eyes move toward us, but not one of their heads turned. I looked over and I could see that at least two of them were duping the screen at my terminal, watching exactly what I had been doing. I probably should have made sure it was a secure terminal before beginning, but I don't think I entered any sensitive information anyway.

"Sorry I had to interrupt your date."

"I wasn't on a date." I told her.

“Oh?” she said. I saw a smile in her eyes, but it didn’t show on her mouth. “I guess I just assumed.”

“We were, um, watching movies with a group of people from, uh, school… and stuff.”

“Sorry I had to interrupt that, then.” she said. She rubbed at her eyes. “Damn, I’m tired.”

“Is there any way to bypass the usual startup on the reactors, Bao? You don’t need to do a full inspection or rebuild this time, you know there isn’t a problem with them.”

“I actually *don’t* know that there isn’t anything wrong with them. There is only one of them that I can trust to be rebuilt correctly the last time, and even that one may have been damaged by this exercise. That’s why I was trying so hard to get control, so I could bring them down gradually and not do any damage.”

“How high do you think they can go over max output and still be able to pull them down to a safe level?” I asked.

“Best guess: thirty percent. Over that, I wouldn’t even want to try it. Even then I’d have to keep a close eye on them and shut them down soon for a rebuild.”

“This is a very expensive breakdown.” I said.

The Freedom could run on battery power and small backup generators for a few days, even at full power, but we would need to get those reactors back up and running before too long. To do that would probably mean overtime pay. And then there’s the extra reactor fuel that we burned by using the ion engines to turn instead of the thrusters, partially offset by the fact that we didn’t burn the thruster fuel. I suspected that we’d have to burn thruster fuel to correct the extra we turned that we shouldn’t have, since the engines were stuck for a while. Then we would have all the wasted fuel and materials inside the reactors, which gets replaced during each rebuild. Since part of those reactors were just rebuilt, that meant wasting a lot of materials.

“Commander, do you read me?” Anna’s voice came over the comm channel.

“Yes, Chief.” Bao responded. “What’s the situation?”

“Ma’am, I don’t think it’s as bad as it seems. I’m having them shut down reactors two and four now. The main trunk lines down either side of the maintenance passage are partially torn open. I think I can get at least one of them reconnected long enough that we can pull the other two reactors down. We can do a more permanent repair later on.”

“Oh thank the holy maker Himself.” Bao said, looking very

relieved. “Keep someone next to one and three in case we need to kill them as well, Chief.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’ll keep you up to date, Commander. Wilson out.”

There was a collective sigh from everyone in the room. People seemed very pleased. A couple of the system people asked Bao if they could be excused so they could get a few hours of sleep before their shift in the morning, and she let them go.

“I’m glad Wilson came down with you. I don’t know what I’m going to do once you steal that girl away from me.” Bao said.

“I haven’t even interviewed her yet, so don’t borrow worries.” I said, fully aware that the sys people could hear us.

“Yeah, well, you *will* steal her from me. If you’re smart.” She patted my back. “And you are.”

It was only a moment until the screen showed a status for the reactors. They were only up fifteen percent over max output, and before Bao could tell anyone else or say anything, I initiated a draw down.

“You aren’t interested in a job, are you?” she asked me. “I could use some help cleaning house around here.”

“Sorry.” I said, shaking my head no.

“This is good.” she said, now watching the screen. “The two that are still up look like they’ll be okay, maybe. At least for a couple of weeks. I think what I’ll do is leave these two up while the others are rebuilt, which I *will* be overseeing myself. We’re good here. I don’t think they even look damaged.”

“Don’t forget our trip to the Gale.”

“Damn,” she said. “I guess I’ll have to check the work when I get back instead of overseeing the rebuilding. I’d leave Chief Wilson here to oversee, but they need to be certified by a lieutenant or higher anyway, per regs.”

“Yes, that’s true.” I told her.

It was part of the rules, they wanted someone at least that high of rank certifying that they personally checked the work before the reactors could ever be switched on. It’s not usually the case on most things, but if something bad happened with the reactors then a lot of people could die. Quickly.

The fact that she didn’t trust her lieutenants to certify the

rebuilding worried me. I would really need to talk to Milton about that, because it was a massive concern if anything ever happened to Bao. There were a lot of good people on board, some even in her division, and we needed to work on training them and getting them into position to work their way up the ranks there so there would always be people ready to do what needed done if Bao were no longer available.

"Well, it looks like the crisis has been averted." Bao said. She patted my back. "Thanks for the help, kiddo. You can head out now."

"Glad I could help."

"Oh, did you want to stick around until Chief Wilson gets back? You could use my office to interview her."

"Um," There were many sets of eyes on me. I didn't look about to see them, I could just feel them. "Not tonight." I said. "And I would appreciate it if she not know she's being considered yet."

"Of course." Bao said.

"Thank you." I said. I glanced over to the sys crew in the room. "That applies to the rest of you too, please." I told them. "Unless you have any objections to that, Commander?"

"Better nobody say a word!" Bao told them. "Got it?"

There were a lot of nods, but I still felt nervous. I was having enough problems with this anyway, and I didn't want to make it worse. If Anna knew she was going to be considered for the position, would it make it awkward for us when we were together when volunteering? Especially if she wasn't chosen? I just didn't want that to be a problem.

Some little part of me actually had a tiny hope that one day she and I… no, even that small part knew better than to dream that big.

"Go get some sleep, kiddo." Bao said, giving me a nod. "We've got it from here."

"Goodnight, Bao."

## Chapter Five

In the morning I awoke to a message from Milton. He wanted me to cover the bridge from twelve hundred to fourteen hundred. He had a meeting with Sally and Bao to consider changes in Engineering. Apparently Bao was way ahead of me on speaking to Milton about our less than spectacular crews there.

I fired off a response, confirming that I had gotten his message and would be there. It took only a few minutes for me to get ready for the gym and toss on a touch of makeup.

At the gym I went through my usual yoga exercises, as well as twenty minutes on the treadmill. It gave me time to think. I needed to get the other interviews done soon. I wondered if Casey and Anna would be available today, and a check on their schedules confirmed that both had time. I sent a message to Casey, requesting that he come to the bridge shortly after twelve hundred. I saw no reason why I couldn't cover the bridge and interview him at the same time.

That left Anna. I wasn't ready for that one yet. I still had to work up the courage, not to mention answer my own question about whether I could work with her without it causing problems. I thought I could. I was really worried that I was being biased in her favor, though.

I showered and dressed, and did my best to look presentable in a lighter makeup and looser hair than usual. I was feeling lazy that day.

It was only eleven hundred, but my stomach was empty after skipping breakfast as I made my way to the cafeteria and chose a massive salad with tofu and a tangy vinaigrette. To that I added a large ice tea and some rice crackers with peanut butter.

I sat, unfolded my tablet to read, and took two bites before someone stepped up beside me. I glanced up quickly to see Anna

Wilson standing there.

"Hi, Callie!" she said cheerfully. "Is this seat taken?"
"Anna!" I blurted. "Hinogohead in havasee."

It wasn't until her blank look turned to a laugh that I realized I had just uttered complete and total nonsense to her. Again. I sighed and took a deep breath.

"I mean," I said, shaking my head. "Hi. No, go ahead and have a seat."
"Thanks." she said, still giggling.

My face was burning hot, and I was pretty sure that, as much as I wished right then, the deck wasn't going to open up and suck me into space.

Why did I let myself get like this?

I did my best to listen to her talk about the movies we had seen the previous night, but I kept losing track of what she was saying. To be honest, I kept getting hung up on the curve of her collarbone where it met her neck.

"I need to get going." she said, slurping down the last of her soda. "Bao is letting me off early tonight because of ruining our night last night."
"Nice of her." I managed.
"So are you off this evening?" she asked.
"I have overnight. Milton also has me covering a couple of hours this afternoon."
"Oh," she said, looking dejected. "I was hoping you'd have time off this evening, but it sounds like you'll be busy all day."
"No!" I said too quickly. "I ha-have, um, time from fourteen hundred until I go on duty."
"Oh," she said again, this time with a hopeful look on her face. "So, I was wondering if maybe you'd like to have dinner someplace nice tonight?"

She kept glancing away and and back. Her hands were doing that clasping and loosening thing that I remember her sometimes doing before tests back in school. Was she nervous?

"You don't have to, I just thought–"

"Yes!" I said. "I mean… I'll go."

"Good!" she said, smiling down at me. "I mean… I just thought maybe we could catch up a little. It's been a while, and–"

"Sure. Sounds good!"

"And you can choose the place. Or I will, whatever."

"You choose." I told her.

"How about Midnight Sands?" she asked.

Midnight Sands was a restaurant on deck six, and was probably the fanciest restaurant we had. It used to be a nightclub, but when it started losing money the owners converted it to a straight up restaurant. A very good one.

"Or not." she added. "I mean if you don't want to go there we can go somewhere else."

"No, that sounds… um, good to me."

"Great! How does nineteen hundred sound?"

"That works."

"Great! I really do have to go now."

"Oh! Me too!" I said, realizing it was nearly twelve hundred already. "See you later!"

We bumped into each other as we both hurried over to the recycler to dump our leftovers, and placed our dishes in the sanitizer. We giggled and went on our way, waving as we parted at the door.

I got to the bridge just in time to see Milton off for his meeting. He looked a little worried that I may not make it in time, but he didn't say anything other than what was necessary to sign me on as OIC.

I was waiting for Casey to arrive, trying not to daydream about Anna, and I started viewing logs. We were still off course from our unplanned maneuver last night, but not far. I also noticed that we were approaching an area near a massive asteroid. This was usual, we actually were able to use them to provide a small slingshot to speed us along, if they were big enough. And this one was massive. In many cases it would qualify as a planet, if it were the only thing in its orbit and was spherical. This one was part of a slew of them in this particular orbit, and it was almost flat.

It kind of looked like a giant fried egg flip flopping through space. It even had a sort of whitish glare coming from it, based on our imaging.

Every now and then there seemed to be a weird bump appear. It wasn't picked up in any kind of scans, much like the blank spaces in the scans from before, but in this case it showed up visually. Sometimes.

At first I thought it was part of the asteroid. It looked that way, usually, and would make sense. But the more I looked, the more it seemed like it wasn't really a part of the larger body. The more I stared at it, the more I started to think it was another rock of some sort, and just happened to be orbiting near the larger rock, maybe *around* the larger rock, and we were just at such an angle that the two blurred together.

"Ensign Lewis, I'm sending some course changes to your screen." I told him. "Would you please lay those in."

"I don't think that's wise." he said.

"And why, may I ask, would that be?"

"The captain himself set these coordinates just before he left, ma'am."

"I see." I told him. "Please continue to enter the corrections I sent."

"We should wait for the captain." he said.

"I"ll speak with Milton about it later on. For now just do it."

"I would rather not." he said.

"Seriously, Dom?" Sokolov asked him. "You should follow orders."

"Stay out of this." Ensign Lewis told him.

"Lay in the changes, Ensign." I ordered.

"I'm going to contact Captain Nelson first." he said, pulling up a comm screen.

"Ensign Lewis!" I shouted.

Everyone turned and looked at me. I really didn't usually shout quite that loudly on the bridge. Or ever. I had their attention, at least.

"You can lay in the course changes, or you can remove yourself from the bridge and contemplate your responses for your hearing."

"Hearing?" he asked, squirming in his seat.

"You have five seconds to follow my order or I will ask security to remove you and I will file charges of insubordination, Mister Lewis." I said, doing my best to look command-y.

"Yes, ma'am." he said.

He laid in the changes and stared directly ahead, barely moving, for the next five minutes. When I had finally calmed down, I moved next to Lewis.

"Mister Lewis, do you have a problem with me?" I asked him, genuinely curious.

"Ma'am?" he asked, still not shifting his eyes away from the screen directly in front of him.

"Is there something about me, personally, that you do not like or respect, or do you treat all superiors this way?"

"The fact that you have to ask that question proves a lot, ma'am." he said, finally turning his attention to me. "You are not prepared for your position, in my opinion, *ma'am*. You have no experience–"

"*Shut your mouth*, man!" Ensign Cho implored.

"And you are only here because Captain Nelson feels sorry for you." Lewis continued.

"You believe that?" I asked him. "You do. I'm sorry you feel that way, Mister Lewis. I can't make you respect me, but I am your superior, and you *will* respect that position."

"Yes ma'am!" he sounded off.

"Can I speak freely, Lieutenant?" Ensign Sokolov asked.

"Please do."

"Ma'am, Lewis does not speak for the rest of us. Furthermore, even if he does question your qualifications, it is my belief that by openly disregarding your direct order he not only defaces himself, but he brings into question Captain Nelson's judgment. I would like to apologize on Ensign Lewis' behalf, ma'am. He's not usually a bad guy, overall."

"Really?" I asked. I eyed Lewis. "Okay, I'll take your word for it. Mister Lewis, please don't let your lack of faith in me taint your own judgement from now on, hm? You're better than that."

He gave me a long hard stare, crinkling his eyes for a moment. But then something changed. His face relaxed and he nodded.

"Yes, ma'am." he said, adding "Sorry ma'am, I've been under a lot of stress at home lately."

"We'll let it go this time." I told him. "Anything I can help with as far as the stress at home, Ensign?"

"Thank you, ma'am. No, just marital disagreements, ma'am."

"Well please let me know if I can help, Mister Lewis."

"Thank you." he said.

That was very awkward. What was more awkward, at least to me, was when I turned to head back to my seat I found Lieutenant Casey standing in the door, waiting for me. I motioned him toward the ready room.

"Thank you for coming, Lieutenant Casey." I said. "How would you have handled that situation?" I asked him.

"The blatant insubordination? I would have chucked him in the brig and filed charges immediately, but that's just me."

"That easily?" I persisted. I took a seat and indicated that he should sit across from me.

"He disobeyed an order." he said, giving me a puzzled look. "Lieutenant, how else would *you* expect a lower ranking crewmember to react to an order than to immediately and completely follow that order to the very best of his or her ability, whatever they may think of that order or the superior giving it?"

I had to think about that. He was right, of course, but there was more to it than that. You couldn't just go locking everyone up who questioned an order. If that was the case, Milton would have locked me up dozens and dozens of times.

"Is there ever a reason to ignore or question an order, in your opinion?" I asked. "Or even to ask questions to verify things?"

"Well sure, you can ask questions if you don't understand the order. That goes without saying."

"But to question the reasons or intelligence of an order?"

"None." he said flatly. "Not unless the order is unlawful or would put the crew at risk."

"What about after the fact?" I asked him. "If someone followed the order first, could they come back and ask the reasons behind it? Could they voice concerns that whatever you had them do should not have been done?"

"If we start down that path then we set conditions for the crew to think this is a democracy, Lieutenant." he said, chuckling. "This most certainly is not a democracy."

"That much is true." I agreed. "So, just to finish this subject before moving on, could they question an order if they think there is a better way to accomplish what you want?"

"Miss Monroe, do you honestly think that would be a wise way for lower rankings to behave? What would happen if every time you told them you wanted to change course by firing all the port side thrusters they took the time instead to offer up a dozen different ideas? It would waste time, and potentially cause more problems than

it was worth."

It may also open the door for creative ideas that were more efficient or better suited to whatever I was asking. I kind of hoped he was trying to look tough and in command with that talk, because I worried about his department otherwise.

"Okay then," I said. I unfolded my tablet and read from my list of questions. "Do you know why you're here, Mister Casey?" I asked.

"I believe so, yes." he said.

"Good. So please start by describing a situation where two crewmembers under your supervision had a conflict and how you helped resolve that."

"Certainly," he said.

He stood without finishing and walked over to the coffee dispenser and filled a cup for himself, his back to me as if he were ignoring me, and very obviously did not think to be cordial and offer to get me any. Not that I would drink coffee, anyway. He took a few moments to cool his coffee with some water from the tap, added flavoring from one of the dispensers, added some powdered creamer, and stirred slowly. He then returned to his seat and drank half the cup before he even tried to speak. I gave him space to consider his answer, but he was already rubbing me the wrong way.

"Do you need a moment, Lieutenant?" he asked me.

"Excuse me?" I said. It occurred to me that he had completely forgotten that I had asked him a question. "I asked if you could describe a situation where two of the crew you supervise had a conflict and how you helped resolve that."

"Right." he said, nodding.

It continued on like that for ten minutes, me asking questions and him not seeming to care one way or the other if his answers were even remotely the kind of answers we'd expect from an officer.

"Mister Casey," I said, interrupting a rambling answer to a question I did not ask. "Are you even interested in being third officer?"

"Does it pay more?" he asked, smiling. If that was supposed to be a joke, it wasn't funny. "I really haven't given it a lot of thought, honestly." he said.

"Well let me ask this, then: Do you ever see yourself as captain? Or even as first officer?"

"No, not in the least." he admitted, shaking his head no. "I'm just not that ambitious."

"I see. Well, thank you for your time, Lieutenant. I think that's all the questions I need to ask for now. I'll be completing my round of interviews and passing my findings along to Milton. I'm sure we'll let you know the outcome." And I was sure what the outcome would be, as far as he was concerned.

"Very well. Thank you, Lieutenant Monroe. It's been an interesting discussion."

"Thank you, Mister Casey."

I watched him go in disbelief. How did that man ever get put in charge of anyone? With his view on how junior crew should respond, I thought *maybe* he could survive in a position where he served directly under someone, but I wouldn't put that man in charge of a group whose sole responsibility was to clean toilets.

First Lieutenant Thompson, now Lieutenant Casey. How the phlegm did these people end up in their positions? Surely they couldn't be that incompetent. At least I hoped not. For all our sakes.

That left only Anna. Was I just being overly critical of Thompson and Casey because of Anna? I didn't think so, but I never thought Milton would put people of *that* caliber on a short list to become his third officer. On the other hand, I also put them on my short list, so obviously their records and recommendations were misleading.

I spent a few minutes typing out my notes and report on Lieutenant Casey before I returned to the bridge. I spent the rest of the time until Milton relieved me studying the asteroid we were approaching. There were no usable minerals at all on it. Such a waste of a rock.

I spent the afternoon viewing the training materials we had for bridge officers and command crews. If I were going to help in training on the Gale I needed to be prepared. It was mostly obvious stuff to me, but seeing it laid out in order like that helped me get some ideas about how to proceed in a manner that would make sense to others who may not know it quite as well.

By seventeen-thirty I decided I needed to get ready for my date with Anna. Okay, it was not a *date*, just dinner. To catch up. Still, I wanted to look my best, and I showered and put on a purple dress that

I thought I remembered her complimenting once.

When Anna buzzed my door at a quarter ‘til nineteen hundred, I felt my stomach drop. I was going to spend the whole evening with just her. Okay, her and whoever else was in the restaurant. Still, we’d be alone at a table together.

I kind of had dreamt of this for a while now.

“Hi.” I squeaked, as the door finished sliding open.
“Hi.” she said.

Her eyes travelled down, taking in what I was wearing, and I saw her cheeks turn pink. I thought maybe she was worried that she wasn’t dressed well enough, but I thought her black slacks and cream colored blouse were very nice.

“Are you, uh, ready?” I asked. Her eyes darted up at mine. “Or if you need to use the bathroom, or possibly get some water or something…” I said, trailing off as her eyes widened.
“No! Let’s go.”

She grabbed my hand and started down the passageway. After a moment I heard the door slide shut behind us, the automatic sensor kicking in. She suddenly jerked her hand free and gave a sideward glance at me.

“How was your day?” she asked.
“Kinda normal.” I told her. “Yours?”
“It was a really good day. Stressful, but good.”
“Why stressful? I mean more than normal?”
“Commander Xiang held a big meeting for everyone in our division. She dismissed six people, reassigned four others, and welcomed four newcomers who transferred from Science and Administrative.”

I stopped walking. There were a total of fourteen crew involved and I managed to somehow be out of the loop on it?

“Did she run that past the captain?” I asked her.
“He was actually there for the meeting, as was my mother.”
“So that’s where he was right after lunch!”
“Yep.”

When we entered Midnight Sands there was some kind of easy music playing, but I could still hear a faint sound of machinery in the background from the waiting area before we were seated. One downside of the location it was in on deck six was its location in relation to the industrial area. There were several small manufacturing businesses that made items to order for the public, and the machinery would resonate through the bulkheads. It didn't continue into the dining area, at least, but there had been a constant clanking, humming sound in the waiting area.

The table they took us to was a two-seater along one bulkhead. The place was relatively empty at the time, with only about five other tables occupied. Our host placed menus before us and let us know that the waiter would be along soon.

"I'm Steve," a man said before the host even had a chance to turn away from us. "I'll be your waiter this evening. Can I get you ladies anything to drink?"

"Callie?" Anna said, nodding for me to go first.

"Just water, thanks." I told Steve.

"And you, miss?" he asked Anna.

"Grape spritz, please." she told him.

"Certainly. I'll let you ladies consider your menu while I get your drinks. I'll be right back."

The menu prices were rather hefty. I remember coming here once a year ago with Milton, but I didn't actually look at the menu that time, just ordered a tofu steak and some salad.

"What looks good?" Anna asked. "Other than you, of course." she said.

I peered around the menu to see her pink cheeks peeking out from behind her menu, but her eyes darted away quickly.

"Uh," I said, not sure how to respond to that. "Supposedly they have a really good vegetarian chili here. I may try that."

"Me too. Sounds good." she said, laying her menu down.

"But you're not vegetarian." I said.

"Well someone I respect a lot is, so I've been rethinking my stance on eating meat."

She looked at me, her electric smile shining across at me. Wow she was gorgeous.

“Here you go.” the waiter said, setting our drinks before us. “Are you ladies having a special night tonight?”

“Just hungry.” Anna told him, blushing again. “We’re ready to order.”

“Absolutely!” he said, whipping out his tablet. “What can I get for you?”

“We’ll both have the vegetarian chili.” she told him.

“And would you like any rice or pasta with that?” he asked.

“No, thank you.” she said.

“None for me, either.” I told him. “But can we get plenty of crackers?”

“Certainly. Will that be all for you ladies?”

Anna nodded and the waiter took our menus and disappeared. We sat there, staring at each other silently, for probably five minutes. Okay, it was probably one, but it felt like five.

“What’s new with you?” she asked.

“Nothing much. You?”

“Dealing with parental issues, working a lot, things like that. I graduated since the last time we spent much time together, I guess.”

“I made it up to second officer.” I offered, and we both laughed. “Obviously.”

“And now you have your own place.” she said, nodding. “Lots of visitors?”

“Not really any.”

“At least you *could.* I still live with my parents. Not a chance for privacy there.”

“I suppose.”

“How have you been personally?” she asked, and again I was blown away by her beauty.

“Okayut sleeping with problemha.” I muttered.

Her tinkling laugh froze me, my heart thudding. This was supposed to be a couple of friends catching up, but how I wished it was more.

“I mean,” I said, laughing along with her. “I’m okay, but I’ve been having problems sleeping.”

“As usual?”

“Yeah.” I agreed.

“I’m sorry, Sweet Little Callie.” she said, calling me a nickname whose origins I couldn’t recall. “I wish I could do something to help.”

“It’s okay.” I shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

“I remember one time Captain Nelson had an overnight shift, so you stayed the night with us.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I was probably ten, so you would have been seven. No, maybe eight by then.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “You have a birthday coming up soon, don’t you? Anyway, you would not go to sleep for anything. Mom was at her wits end, so she just shoved me in your direction and told me to keep you company. I was so tired, but you wouldn’t go to sleep. Finally I sat beside you and ran my hands through your hair and you just laid there and relaxed. It was only a couple of minutes before you were out.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my face burning. “I do remember that! My gosh, I haven’t thought about that for years.”

“I remember you were so still and your face was relaxed, and I just sat there for a while, watching you sleep. You’re hair was a mess by then, but you were just so pretty, and I just… I just remember thinking you were going to grow up to be a beautiful woman.” She looked down at her hands. “I was right, I guess.”

Someone across the restaurant laughed so loudly that we both jerked our heads in his direction. The rest of the guests at his table were not laughing. Like everyone else in the restaurant, they were staring at him. He choked off his laugh abruptly and scooped a large bite of his steak into his mouth.

When our chili arrived, along with a massive plate of crackers, Anna and I dug in and didn’t speak much. We both commented at how good it was, but that was about it. We declined dessert afterward, and the waiter took away our dishes and left us with the check.

“I’ve got it.” I said, reaching out with my tablet to scan the code on the bottom.

“No,” Anna said, blocking the barcode with her hand. “I asked you out, not the other way around.”

“Um, thanks.” I said, letting her get it.

“So Callie, I guess Bao let it slip that you may interview me for the opening in Command.”

“I guess I can’t rely on her to keep anything secret.” I said, shaking my head. “Figures.”

“Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that it doesn’t change anything between us.” she said. Her face turned a light pink. “What I mean is, I won’t be mad if you don’t recommend me. We’ll still be friends.”

“Good.” I said, nodding. “Th-that’s important.”

I looked down and considered telling her that right then that she was the frontrunner, simply because the others were so horrible, but I didn’t. It would be improper to let her know that, especially before our interview.

Especially since I wasn’t sure I could even recommend her, if I was going to be fair. Especially after that night. I wasn’t sure what our dinner that night was, but it felt almost like a date. I mean not… but maybe.

Was it?

“I assume Bao also explained that you’ll be going along to the Gale?” I asked her, trying to not think of the burning feeling in my own face.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Commander Xiang *really* can’t be trusted with a secret.” she added, snorting.

“Well this wasn’t a secret, actually. Anyway, if you get a chance you may want to glance at the training materials for guidance. I know I found them beneficial.”

“I will.”

“Oh, hey, did you figure out what cut those lines in the maintenance passage?”

“We think so, actually.” she said, and her face went into work mode and lost its relaxed expression. “Commander Bao and Chief Logan found out that they exactly matched the corners of a maintenance cart. What Logan thinks happened is that one of the teams overloaded the cart, lost control of it, and it banged back and forth along the passage. There are several dings before and after that location, and it slopes downhill there, so that makes sense.”

“Let me guess, nobody has admitted to it yet?”

“No.” she said, agreeing with a nod. “But we know who it is. He no longer has a job, as of today.”

“Well, he put the whole ship in danger, so that makes sense.”

“Captain Nelson gave a long speech about our responsibility to the rest of the crew and passengers. That wasn’t good enough for Commander Xiang, once he was gone she tore us all apart about honesty and being able to trust each other.”

“Oh I bet that was pleasant.”

“Very.” she said, laughing. “I hadn’t even heard of some of the words she used. Though the meaning was pretty clear.”

I could imagine. Bao has, at times, a very graphic and expressive vocabulary. I had been on the receiving end of that exactly once in my life. That was enough for me.

"Can I get you ladies any dessert?" the waiter asked again, appearing at my side.

"None for me." I answered.

"Me either." Anna replied.

We headed out into the passage and strolled along. Anna kept glancing sideways at me, like she was waiting for me to initiate conversation, but I couldn't think of anything to say. Not a thing at all.

"We didn't do a lot of catching up." she finally said as we neared my quarters.

"Uh, yeah." I agreed.

"Maybe we can do this again so we can talk more?"

"Yeah," I said. I felt my head nodding vigorously and I forced myself to stop so I wouldn't look like a complete idiot. "I would like that."

"I had a really good time, Callie." she said.

We stopped in front of my door and I looked up at her. Her perfect eyes, her beautiful smile. We just kind of stood there for a moment.

"I had a really good time." she repeated slowly, staring into my eyes.

"Me too."

"I had a really good time." she said again. She shook her head. "I gotta go! Have a good night."

"Good…" She hurried down the passage, away from me. "Night." I finished.

I went into my quarters and spent quite a while replaying the evening. What happened, exactly? Why had she wanted me to go with her to dinner, really? Was she trying to get in good so she would get the job?

No, Anna wouldn't do that.

I had to clear my head. I went out into the passage and began pacing the length of the ship. I finally found my way to Mark's

quarters and buzzed his door.

"Callie," he said a moment later, surprise registering on his weary face. "What brings you here at…" he squinted at the clock. "Twenty three thirty?"

"I need to talk."

"Please come in." he said.

He stepped aside and motioned for me to enter. I walked across to his sofa and sat, waiting for him to join me.

"What brings you here at this cursed hour?" he asked me.

"I need your opinion?" I said.

"Are you certain of that, hon?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Okay then, start from the beginning."

"I just need to know… I mean…" This was hard. "Okay, so like, do you think it is a conflict of interest for an officer to, um, maybe… *possibly* have… like, feelings for someone under her?"

"Oh," he said, leaning back. "I see. A very serious issue indeed."

"I guess." I nodded and averted my gaze to try to hide my embarrassment.

"And how is Anna these days?" he asked.

I felt a crushing weight of… I don't-know-what settling onto me. Fear? Of being found out, maybe?

"What?!" I said, playing innocent. "No, it's not… I just mean… it's theoretical, and…"

"Oh dear, you've had a crush on her for at least five years now. At least five."

"No," I told him, shaking my head. "What makes… why would you think that?"

"Hm," he said. He chuckled. "For years now, my dear girl, you've always managed to find a way to talk about young Miss Wilson nearly every time I see you. I think that just *might* be a sign, don't you?"

"No, I… I mean… okay," I sighed. "What do I do?"

"What happened to the girl who was never going to be in a relationship?" he asked. He wasn't trying to hide his amusement. "Did you think this wouldn't come up if you made it to captain one day?"

"I didn't think… I mean…" I sighed again. "Okay, so… Now Milton has me interviewing people for the open third spot, and–"

"And Anna is one of the candidates?"

"Yeah."

"A tough position to be in, especially for a young lady such as yourself." He wiped his face with his hands. "Have you considered going to the captain with this?"

"No, I can't do–"

"I'm sorry, Callie, but it's really the only answer I can come up with. But let me ask, do you really think no captains have ever been in a relationship? Ask yourself how they make it work. I suspect the answer will help you with this particular problem."

"No, I just… just because I, um, have feelings for… her, it doesn't mean we're going to… I mean… she hasn't even said anything about… I mean… I'm just worried I'll be biased."

"Talk to the captain, Callie." he repeated.

"I… guess." I said, nodding. Great. "I have to go on duty, I better go."

He showed me to the door, and I saw the wide grin that spread across his face as the door slid shut. I hated that look. It meant he has suspected I was full of crap all this time when I swore that I'd never want a relationship with anyone, ever.

Hey, I was just fifteen, give me a break.

I signed on as OIC, taking over from Commander Rowe. He ran through a quick list of emerging issues, such as a small fire in the kitchen of one of the restaurants on deck six and Ensign Teague calling in sick, before he left the bridge.

"It's just the three of us tonight, Ensigns." I said aloud, heading toward my seat.

"I spoke with Maury earlier, Lieutenant." Ensign Alonso told me. "He has a terrible migraine and can't even stand up. Dr. Burton tried to give him something after dinner, but he's allergic to some of the stronger analgesics, and the ones he can take don't work as well for migraines. He should be fine by tomorrow, ma'am."

"Thank you, Ensign."

I settled in and began reviewing logs. Nothing much to look at, really. I got a quick message on my screen from fire control that they had gotten the fire out, and no major damage was done, apart from the kitchen itself.

"Lieutenant," Ensign Alonso said. "I was just looking at some

navigational data, ma'am, and I happened to notice that the Gale did not track with us when we made our previous course change. They're still heading for the asteroid, ma'am."

"Huh." I rose from my chair and got closer to him, looking at the data showing their path on his screen. "We did send them the course change, didn't we?"

"Uh," He opened a screen with the navigation station logs and scrolled to the entry where we sent that across to the Gale and got the reply. "Yes, they did, ma'am."

"Ensign Kre,"I said, turning to her. "Could you please put me in contact with the Gale."

I returned to my seat and waited as Kre punched in some information on her screen, then mumbled something into her headset. She turned and nodded, indicated they were on.

"Gale, this is Lieutenant Monroe from the Freedom, who am I speaking to."

"This is Ben." a voice came out.

"Ben?" I asked. No rank? No ma'am tacked onto the end? And is that a first or last name.

"Yeah, what d'ya need?"

"Well, Ben, we sent some data on a course change to you a while back, but my nav officer was noticing that you have not laid in those changes as yet."

"I don't know about that."

"I see. Well," I said, sighing. "I'm having Ensign Alonso resend those changes to you," I signaled for him to do so. "You'll need to alter your course right away."

"I'll put it on the list for the morning." Ben told me.

"Uh, no," I said, blinking in surprise. "I'm sorry, Ben, I didn't catch your rank."

"I really don't have time for–"

"*Make* time." I ordered.

"It's Chief. Now if you have nothing else…"

"Uh, Chief Ben, I *do* have something else. I need you to make those changes right away."

"I told you–"

"I wasn't asking, Mister Ben." I said, angry.

"You really have no authority here." he replied.

"Excuse me?" I asked, dumbfounded. I looked at Alonso, who had a shocked look on his face, then to Kre, who was amused. To Chief Ben I said "I am OIC, Ben. Per regulation, when the OIC on the UNSC Freedom orders a course change the UNSC Atlantic Gale follows

that order, do you understand?"

"You'll have to talk to my captain about that."

"I will do just that, but for now you will make the changes."

"I don't think so." he said.

The communication cut off.

He actually cut me off?

"Get him back." I ordered Kre.

"Trying, ma'am, but they aren't responding."

"Un-frilly-pantyhose believable!" I shouted. "Get me their captain, emergency channel."

"Ma'am, we should get Captain Nelson here first." she said.

"Just contact Captain Broussard, Kre."

"I think we should contact Captain Nelson first." she repeated.

"Why doesn't anyone listen to me?!" I shouted. "Kre,"

"Because sometimes you act like a complete little brat, Callie." she said.

"Excuse me?" I asked, finding it hard to believe she actually just said that?

"Ashley didn't mean anything by that, Lieutenant." Alonso told me.

"Yes, I did."

"I'm confused." I said. "If that's how you feel, why the hell did you vote to elevate me to second?"

"Because I think you'll be a fine second officer!" she shouted. "Eventually. But Callie, you need to learn to listen to your crew when they tell you things. Sometimes they know better than you do."

That actually kind of hit me, and I moved back to my seat and sat down. Did I not listen to people? Is that why I sometimes got resistance, because people thought I didn't care about their opinions.

That would explain so much.

"That's undoubtedly true. And thank you for pointing that out, Ashley."

"We should contact Captain Nelson." she said again.

"While I appreciate your input on this matter, Ensign Kre, this particular instance is a clear case of imminent threat to the Gale, as well as a clear cut case of the Gale crew ignoring a direct and lawful command. Please contact Captain Broussard."

"Okay, Callie, have it your way." she said, punching at

buttons. “Sorry, Lieutenant.” she added.

I didn’t listen to my crew? All this time I thought was doing okay with that, but if it was true then I had a lot of changes to make. And I thought there was some truth to that.

“I’ll try to do a better job of listening.” I said outloud.
“It’s not that bad, Lieutenant.” Ensign Alonso said.
“It’s not all the time, ma’am.” Ensign Kre added.

I waited as Kre got Captain Broussard for me. It took a couple of minutes, she was apparently asleep. When her voice came on you could tell how tired she was.

“Sorry to wake you, Captain Broussard.” I said. “This is Lieutenant Callie Monroe, OIC of the Freedom. I ordered a small course change and your crew not only neglected to make the changes ordered, but directly told me they would not. Not only that, Captain, but Chief Ben did not follow proper protocol when addressing a superior officer, and he was very rude. He showed a striking ignorance of regulations, or else he intentionally was playing dumb.”
“Ben?” she asked.
“Yes, ma’am.” I said. “I need you to make those changes now, Captain.”
“Why is this so important that you needed to wake me at this hour?” she asked, sounding rather pissy.

That’s the second time I’d had someone ask me that that night. I was kind of getting tired of hearing it already.

“With all due respect, Captain, I’m OIC of the UNSC Freedom, I’m ordering you to make a course change.”
“I appreciate that fact, *Lieutenant*,” she said, putting a whole encyclopedia’s worth of extra emphasis on my rank. “I’m sliding my shoes on now, I’ll be on the bridge in less than a minute. In the meantime, explain.”
“Sorry, Captain, I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, it’s just that this could potentially be a threat to your ship if you do not change course soon.”
“And why is that?” she asked.

I explained our scans to her, and what I thought was the problem. I also explained that, while it may be nothing, I was pretty sure there was something there, and ship safety was no place to take

risks.

"Well I'm going to have a chat with Chief Pines, or Ben as you referred to him, about his attitude, Lieutenant. I'll make sure they alter our course immediately."

"Thank you, Captain." I told her.

"Anything else, Lieutenant?"

"Not at this time, ma'am."

"Broussard out." she said.

Twenty minutes later Alonso informed me that he could now detect that the Gale's course had changed.

Just before Milton relieved me in the morning, Alonso started pulling up new data about the Asteroid. It was still loading when I signed OIC over to Milton. I gave him an update about the incident with Chief Ben Pines, then headed toward the door.

"Lieutenant," Alonso said from behind me. "In case you were wondering, ma'am, there is another group of rocks emerging from behind that Asteroid. You were right, ma'am."

"Thank you for letting me know, Ensign." I said.

"Shutter the ports, Ensign Cho." Milton ordered. "Just in case."

"Have a nice day, Milton." I said.

I was right, there was something back there. It was dangerous for us. I knew it! I just knew it.

I went back to my room and relaxed. I spent some time thinking about how I apparently didn't listen to underlings as well as I should have. I also gave some thought to the fact that I was right about the asteroid. That was a good thing, but it felt weird. Why had nobody else seen it before me?

## Chapter Six

There were far, far more people than usual in the cafeteria when I got there. Another NOCO meeting was being held at one end. Jonathan Wilson was giving some loud rendition of his version of a biblical passage against gay people.

I ignored them as well as I could as I made my way through the serving line, picking out a bean burrito and lime cilantro rice, with a chocolate almond milk to wash it down. Doreen scowled pointedly in the direction of the NOCO meeting when I went to pay. All I could do was shrug and shake my head.

Most of the tables were empty, so I chose one as far from the NOCO people as I could get. Actually, most is a gross understatement, since only one other table had anybody at it. I pulled my tablet from my dress pocket, unfolded, and pulled up the reservation list.

Sure enough, NOCO had a reservation.

I tuned them out and did my best to hurry through my meal, not really tasting any of it. I noticed everyone at the other table was hurrying as well, and some people were just taking their food with them and leaving the cafeteria.

My food finished, my leftovers dumped down the recycler, and my dishes placed in the sanitizer, I headed for the door. I was happy to be on my way and let the fools who wanted to listen to Mister Wilson's spiel do so.

"... beat the truth into your children if you have to."

Right up until I heard that.

I stopped so abruptly that someone bumped into me from behind. I think they even muttered an apology before they passed me by and continued on. I turned my head far enough to glance at

Doreen, and the look on her face made it clear that I hadn't heard that incorrectly.

"At the *very first* sign that your children may be having thoughts that homosexuality is a choice they may want to make it is imperative that you, as their parents, make sure to correct them in a way that makes it absolutely clear that it isn't a choice you're going to allow." Mister Wilson continued, punctuating each remark with a firm pounding on the lectern with his fist. "The very best way to make that point may just be physically. Slap your daughter if you have to, but you make sure she doesn't head down that path toward certain condemnation for you *and* your family."

"Hey!" I shouted.

The crowd parted for me as I approached him. He looked surprised that anyone would dare interrupt him at first, then saw it was me and his surprise disappeared. Instead he turned angry, though his mouth curled into a smile.

"Yes, Calliope?" he said.

"Did I just hear you inciting violence toward minors on this ship?" I asked, stepping to the opposite side of the lectern from him.

"Not at all." he said, that same sickening smile on his face as his eyes bore into me. "I was simply giving my opinion on the proper raising of a child who is misguided by other children who are lacking the proper parental guidance on such an issue."

"And that would be to slap your children around?" I asked, completely incensed that he would suggest such a thing.

"If need be." he agreed.

Some of the people in the crowd rumbled in agreement with him. Unbelievable! I spun to look at them and saw such hatred in their eyes. Many of them called me names in hushed tones, and told me to go away in louder ones.

"Are you done interrupting our *religious* outreach program?" Jonathan asked me.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked, turning back toward him. "You were never this hateful or… or… bigoted… before. I spent all that time at your home, studying with Anna, and you never showed any signs that you were this… stupid!"

"Now you're insulting my religious views, Calliope." he said. "May I ask you to please leave."

“So you can continue to tell people to beat their children?”

“Yes.” he said, nodding. He stared into the crowd and raised his hands. “If your child says they are gay, beat them until they no longer think that way.”

“I’m calling security, Mister Wilson.” I told him. I pulled my tablet out. “You cannot promote violence without repercussions.”

“You do that, Calliope.” he said, that sickening smile growing wider.

I pulled my tablet out and ordered a security team to report to the cafeteria. It was less than a minute before they arrived, Sally Wilson right on their tail.

Great.

“Reporting as ordered, Lieutenant.” the Chief of the security team said.

“Take Mister Wilson in.” I told him. “I’m filing charges of inciting violen–”

“That won’t be necessary.” Sally said, stepping to the chief. “There were no regulations broken here, Chief. You can return to your offices.”

“Yes, Commander.” the Chief said.

“Hold, Chief!” I said loudly.

Shockingly, he held. I kind of figured he’d leave, since Sally is not only their direct superior, but is actually my superior as well. But it seemed to be the kind of command that stopped people and made them listen. Kind of like the ones Milton gave

Cool.

“Now listen here, Lieutenant,” Sally said, getting into my face. “You do not override the order of–”

“There is a direct violation of regulation one-seven-one dash–”

“That does not excuse your behavior.” she said.

“I’m not about to stand by as he blatantly calls for people to beat their children, Sally!” I told her. “And I can’t believe you would stand for that, either.”

“Maybe we should have done something sooner, before it was too late.” Sally said, looking down. “No, I wouldn’t agree with violence. But this is a registered religious ceremony. You cannot interfere.”

“Sally…”

The sad part was, she was right. By regulation, unless there was an imminent threat to the ship, crew or passengers, I couldn't really stop them. Not during a registered event. We could restrict some expressions, but not during their own events.

"You're wrong about this, Mister Wilson." I told him.

"I am truly sorry to hear *you* of all people say that, Calliope. If your parents were only here to step in for you–"

"We'll be going now, Jonathan." Sally told him, grabbing my arm. "Sorry we interrupted you."

I shook free from Sally and stormed away from the group before I did something really silly, like punch a civilian. It wouldn't do for me to be arrested by the very security I called.

The fact of the matter was that there was not a darn thing I could do about it. It was irritating to the extreme, but I couldn't.

I stopped by the bridge and sat in my seat to think. I started pulling up logs, just to take my mind off of things.

"Lieutenant?" Milton asked.

"Hi," was all I could manage. I pounded on keys.

"Something specific you are looking for?" he asked me.

"No."

"You do remember that this is no longer your shift, don't you?"

"Leave me alone, Milton." I said. I spun away from my screen. "Fine! I'm angry. I thought maybe I could bury myself in work as a distraction, but that isn't working out."

"Would you like to tell me what it is that has you so angry, Lieutenant?" he asked calmly.

"It's those idiotic…" That's when I realized I was on the bridge, and that there were more than a few ears listening in. And I wasn't behaving very professionally, at that. "Not here, Captain." I said.

"Let's talk in the ready room."

He turned and paced toward the door to the ready room, not waiting for me to follow. Ensign Lewis gave me a weird smirk as I stood and headed after the captain. I'm sure everyone on the bridge will be talking the second the door slides shut.

"How is your day going?" Milton asked, laughter filling his

eyes, but not coming out of his mouth. “Not well, I take it?”

“Milton…”

I took a deep breath, then regaled him with the tale of what had happened in the cafeteria. He managed to listen quietly, nodding along as I rambled.

When I had run out of things to rant about, he waited quietly for a moment. I thought he was trying to come up with a good response. It was a lot to respond to, so I assumed it would take him a moment to tell me what he would do to handle everything.

“I see.” he said.

“Yes?”

“Well, I leave this in your capable hands, Lieutenant.” he told me, standing as if he were going to leave.

“That’s it?” I said, pleading and shocked.

“Well yes, of course.” he replied. “Please keep me updated. I’d like to know how this resolves.”

“But Milton, I…”

I did not expect that. He couldn’t just leave me hanging on this, could he? I mean… was this supposed to be some kind of lesson? Some type of delegation so that I could learn?

“But what about Sally?” I asked.

“Commander Wilson was one hundred percent correct, of course.” he said.

“But… I mean… that’s all you have to say?”

“You knew that much before you came in here, Lieutenant.”

“Well… yeah, but… but… but she’s abusing her position to support that ignorant son of a… to support her husband. Isn’t that an obvious violation of regulations?”

“First of all, I only have your opinion that she did that. At most, she may be taking extra interest in something her husband is doing, giving it more attention than what others are doing. While technically that may be a case of preference, it’s shaky, and it’s very minor.”

“But Milton–”

“And secondly, I’d ask if you were going to place an official complaint against her? If so, please submit it to me in writing, as required. I will then convene a committee to look into the evidence before we have any hearings.”

He was serious.

And he was right.

If I were to push it I'd have to file an official complaint, which would usually go to Administration, but in this case would go directly to the captain because it was about the commander of that division. Then there would be an investigation. And only then would hearings take place.

And it would go nowhere.

It would accomplish nothing at all. Well, that's not true, because it would accomplish one thing: I'd look silly. I would lose respect of people for making such a big case over something that really was nothing. I mean I knew it was something, but it was nothing I could really show. The worst thing she really did was fill in the calendar with a reservation for him when I was quite certain he didn't have one. I couldn't really prove anything there.

"I won't be filing a complaint." I told Milton. "Thank you for letting me vent."

"Any time, Lieutenant."

I went back to my quarters to think. I wasn't wrong about this. It was just silly to make too big of an issue about things. I was reacting too strongly because I was angry. Angry over what Mister Wilson said, yes, but even more angry that Sally stepped in.

No, really because I felt like she undermined me and made me look bad. That was really it, wasn't it? I felt like she made me look bad in front of others the way she overrode my order in front of everyone.

I needed to stop taking things so personally.

So I had to figure out what would be the best way to handle this. If we were not officers, just a couple of civilians with a disagreement, how would I handle this? I guess I'd try to talk to the offending party first. So maybe I should go talk to Sally about all of this?

I fired off a query to Sally, asking for some of her time this afternoon. I got a reply that she had a half hour open just after

fourteen hundred.

My door buzzed then and when I opened it Anna Wilson stared me in the face.

"H-hi." I said.
"Do you have a moment to talk?" she asked.
"Oh. Um, yeah. Sure. In. I mean… in come. No, come in."
"Thanks?" she said, giggling, melting me inside.

She entered and moved over to my sofa. She looked so beautiful. I had to stop thinking about her like that, though. I spent so long making sure I didn't, and now it was happening again.

"Why, um, you did, uh…"

What was I saying? I'm such a gorp.

"I just wanted to discuss the training materials for the Gale." she said. She pulled out her tablet and unfolded it. "I figured, knowing you, you probably have already gone over every detail of the trip and the training in detail five times over."
"Yeah." I said.

I had gone over what I thought we should do, but I hadn't done it five times. I had been distracted.

"So I want your opinion on this." she said.

She stared up at me and smiled and waited until I sat beside her on my sofa. Too close for me to concentrate, actually. But she spent the next few minutes going over her ideas, and I kind of followed well enough to make semi-coherent responses when she asked questions.

"I seem to remember you liking computer games?" she asked, completely off the topic.
"Huh? Oh, um, sort of."
"I have a few classics I loaded on here last night, but most of them don't seem any fun one player." She pulled up a folder with retro games. "Have you ever played any of these, Callie?"
"Yeah, uh, all of them."
"Good! Grab your tablet."

We synced up our tablets and started playing. And by the time I realized it, over an hour had passed and I had to head to my meeting with Sally.

"Um, I have, uh, something I need to do." I said. "I'm sorry, Anna, but I need to stop."

"Well it was a lot of fun. We should do this again."

"Yeah, sure." Yes, please.

"Maybe tonight?" she asked. "If you have some time?"

"Uh–"

"Or maybe we could go to the concert tonight?"

"There's a concert? Who is playing?"

"Celestial Tones. And I think Square Grabb is supposed to do a short set, too."

Oh wow, Square Grabb! I had never been able to see them. They stopped playing live gigs before I was old enough to go to any. I *love* their music. Especially *Base Conduit Tube*.

"I would love to go."

"Great! I'll stop by here around fifteen thirty, if you want, and we can go to dinner first?"

"I should be done with everything by then. But I do need to be back in time for my shift tonight."

"Not a problem, I'm covering nights for now too. Just until Commander Xiang gets someone new trained well enough to head night crews. Then she promises me I'll be moving to full time day shift."

"That'll be nice, won't it?" I said. "Well I hate to rush you out, but I have to go."

"Sure," she said, stepping toward the door as I opened it. "See you in a little while, Callie."

"Yes." I said, nodding. And I realized I had been smiling as I looked forward to that night.

Anna started walking away, and I watched her go. It was a nice sight. She mumbled something, though, and I couldn't quite make it out.

"What did you say?" I asked her.

"What?" she asked, spinning to look at me. "Oh, nothing. See you soon, Callie."

I thought she said something like *why can't you be older*. I was

almost certain that's what I heard. I didn't know how to make any sense of it, but I thought that was what she said.

I had to hurry to make it to the Administration offices in time to meet up with Sally. Crewman George was cleaning the outer office again. He had a warm smile for me, so I made sure to offer him a nice greeting.

"Lieutenant," Sally said, nodding as I approached her door.
"Hi Sally," I said. "I just need a few minutes."
"Sit." she said.

I sat in a comfortable chair as Sally closed the door and made her way around to the other side of the desk. She sat and looked across at me.

"What do you need, Lieutenant?" she asked.
"I just wanted to discuss a couple of things that have been bothering me lately."
"What has been bothering you, Lieutenant?"
"I have concerns about you stepping in and covering for him." I admitted. "I just think–"
"Excuse me?" she snapped.
"I think you overstepped earlier today. You should have let me take care of–"
"I prevented you from trampling on a passenger's rights to freely assemble. You should be *thanking me*."
"And you have overstepped before." I continued. "I'm fairly certain that you retroactively placed their group on the event calendar."
"You're being stupid, you know? I am your superior, I can step in when I think you're about to make a mistake."
"I'm just telling you that I don't think it is right to give NOCO special treatment, Sally."
"Special–"
"And I'm hoping it wasn't intentional, that you will correct things and it won't happen again."

She stared at me for several moments. She was very angry, but she seemed to cool down a bit after a while.

"I disagree with your view of this completely." she said in a calm voice.
"I figured you would." I told her. "Sally, I've always respected

you and looked up to you. I just want to be able to continue to feel that way. Please give it some thought. That's really all I ask."

"Well, Miss Monroe, I will certainly be thinking about what you have said. Is there anything else I can do for you today?"

"I just wanted this chance to voice my concerns. Thank you for listening."

"Of course." she said. "Thank you for bringing them to me, Lieutenant."

She showed me out, and I left feeling as if I had done something wrong. Why should I feel guilty for calling her on it when she did something wrong? You couldn't give people preferential treatment, even if they were family. Or you shouldn't.

And I needed to make sure I didn't give Anna preferential treatment.

I tried in vain to read through more training materials while I waited to go to dinner with Anna, but it wasn't working. I gave up on that and changed clothes and perfected my makeup before she came.

"Hi!" she said, "Ooh, I like this dress."

"Th-thanks." I said. "You are very nice looking." I said.

It took an odd look from her, and me replaying what I had said, before I realized it wasn't quite what I meant. It was true, but it was not what I meant. I just meant that her shirt was pretty.

"Are you ready to eat?" she asked.

"I could shoe an eat." I said. I felt my face burning. "I meant–"

"Got it." she said, giggling. "While I don't believe they serve shoes, Taco Rocko is calling my name tonight. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah, sure."

"I checked to make sure, they do have vegetarian tacos."

"I'm actually in the mood for nachos." I told her.

We walked in relative silence down to deck six. She didn't even attempt to use the lift, as most people do, which shocked me. I seemed to be about the only person who would always use the stairs. It kind of started because I am mildly claustrophobic, but later I realized it was good exercise.

"Wow, there's quite a line." she said, gesturing toward the

people spilling out into the passageway. “Want to go someplace else?”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

“You sure?”

“I mean, you… unless you don’t, um, want to?” I asked.

“No, we can wait.”

The line was moving quickly, at least. The heavenly aroma of refried beans wafted out toward us, making my stomach growl.

*So* embarrassing!

Anna kept talking about something, but I sort of lost the thread of it. Something about the music that night. I honestly just kept staring at her beautiful face.

“Oh, uh, you go first.” Anna said.

“Hm?” I asked. I turned my head and realized we were at the front of the line. “Oh. Um,” I turned to the man behind the counter. “I would like some nachos, a diet soda, and a bean burrito. Oh, and can I get some extra cheese with those nachos?”

“Ye, Lieutenant. Can I ge anythin else for ya, ma’am?”

It took me a second before I realized the man working behind the counter was Crewman George, the man who had been working as janitor in Administrative. Wow, did the man need the money that badly that he had to work two jobs?

“It’s good to see you here, Crewman.” I told him. “Didn’t I just see you a couple of hours ago?”

“Ya, ma’am. Pullin extry hours to elp pay fer me grandson’s birthday present. E’ll be seven next month.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize you had any children old enough to have a seven year old.”

“Me oldest. She’s pregnant with number three.”

“Well congratulations, Mister George.” I said. “Please pass along my best wishes. You have a nice evening, Mister George.”

“You too, ma’am!”

I stepped aside as Anna stepped forward and ordered her tacos and a drink. She paid and we turned to find all the tables were full. One group of ensigns offered to let us have their table, but we declined. We’d squeeze in at the counter if a table wasn’t open by the time our food was ready.

“That was really nice to see you interact with Mister George like that.” Anna said.

“Oh, I just… was being friendly.”

“You were being sweet.” she said, her beautiful eyes resting on mine.

By the time our food was ready, there was an empty table by the door. We sat and ate, and I think we talked about the concert. Again, I was so drawn in by her that what we were talking about just didn’t register.

I hope I didn’t say something stupid and make a fool of myself.

I didn’t think to ask about the price of the tickets before agreeing to go to this concert. Anna was the one talking to the ticket seller, and she quickly paid before I could step in for my part, but I was shocked at the listed prices of over eighty credits. Insane, but worth it to get a chance to see Square Grabb live.

“Give me a second,” I said. I pulled my tablet out and transferred credits from my account to her.

“What’s this?” Anna asked, reading her screen after it beeped.

“Just my part of–”

“No,” she said, dismissing it without accepting the payment. “Absolutely not. I invited you.”

“But it’s a lot–”

“I’m not arguing.” she said, giving me a firm, but beautiful, smile. “Now let’s go inside.”

The music was starting as we found our seats. Not the best in the place, kind of in the middle. Still, they weren’t the worst.

Celestial Tones started with their signature song, *Drifting Rivers*. They segued into *Life Aboard*, then followed that with the harder *Jane’s Shoelace*. It was really good, and Anna seemed to be into it. She was staring up at the stage in rapt attention.

There was no break before Square Grabb started in. In fact, they actually joined in for the last song Celestial Tones played. It was interesting to hear Lia Sandoval’s soft soprano voice with Celestial Tones’ harder music, but it worked well.

Unfortunately, before Square Grabb was finished my tablet was vibrating, letting me know it was time to head out. When I turned to

Anna to tell her I needed to go, she was already standing to leave. It was time for her, too.

"I had such a good time." Anna said. We were outside the auditorium. "Thank you for coming with me, Callie."

"I wish we could have stayed for the end, but we both need to go on duty."

"Yes, well,"

She bent forward and hugged me. I didn't remember her ever doing that before, and it took me by surprise. I stood there, stiff for a few seconds. Then I relaxed and hugged back, enjoying every second I could get of her close to me. Feeling the warmth of her body against mine and smelling the scent of her shampoo was almost overwhelming, it was so wonderful.

"I better go." Anna said. "Have a wonderful night, Callie."

"You too!" I said too perkily. "See you later."

I hurried toward the bridge to relieve Chester as OIC. When I got there I found both Chester and Milton.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Miss Monroe, I will sign off as OIC and you can sign on." Chester said. "There are no substantial or ongoing issues that I am aware of. Have a good evening, Callie."

"Thanks, Chester."

I signed on as OIC and watched as the rest of my bridge crew; Ensigns Kre, Alonso and Teague, all signed on as well. And Milton was still on the bridge.

"What are you doing here, Milton?"

"I couldn't sleep." he admitted. "I was checking in with Mister Rowe to see how the Gale was coming along. They should rendezvous with us around four hundred."

"I can handle this, Milton." I said. I couldn't believe he didn't trust me with this.

"Of course." he said. "I never doubted it, Lieutenant. I'll be heading out in just a moment and leave you to it."

Oh. So he wasn't there because he didn't trust me. Good. I guess. Except I wasn't sure *I* trusted me. Yes, I could handle the rendezvous, but could I be unbiased when selecting a replacement for

Howard?

"Can I talk to you in the ready room for a minute?" I asked him.

"Of course." he said.

For once, I was able to beat him to the room, and I took a seat near his. He sat and waited for me to speak.

"I cannot, in good conscience, make the selection for the replacement for Lieutenant Howard." I told him. I unfolded my tablet and started tapping. "I was able to do part of the interviews, and I made a lot of notes. I'm sending them to you so you can–"

"And why is it you can't make a recommendation, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Please don't ask, Milton."

"It isn't like you to turn down a task like this. Especially one that is so important to the future of this ship, and which shows your ability to make command decisions. I would like an explanation as to what your reasons are."

"Mil-ton!" I whined.

"I'm waiting."

"Please?"

He did not respond that time, other than to sit and look at me, patiently waiting for my reply. I hated this.

"Personal conflict." I mumbled. I couldn't look at him.

"What kind of personal conflict?"

"It's nothing to be concerned about."

"Lieutenant,"

"I'm worried I'll be biased!" I blurted out. "Please don't ask any more."

"Callie," he said, breathing out heavily. "It is important that I know of anything that may pose a problem between crewmembers within my division."

"I'd rather not say."

"If there is a conflict between you and–"

"No, it's not… I'm not worried about that. I just… you're going to make me say it?" I asked. He nodded. "I'm worried I, uh, have… that I may be too, um, rather that I could, maybe… possibly have, um… *feelings* for, um, one of the… candidates."

Could the deck open up and swallow me?

Please?

"I think I understand." he said. "I'll take care of this."
"Thank you."
"And how is Anna Wilson doing these days?"

I was already embarrassed, I could feel myself burning in the face, but that warm feeling of embarrassment was now filling my entire body. I actually felt like I could faint.

"Good." I squeaked. "I think."
"So, given the notes you've sent, and based on our current conversation, I imagine your recommendation, if you were to make one, was going to be Chief Wilson?"
"I don't know." I told him. "I never interviewed her."
"Yes," he said, nodding. "But you know Chief Wilson quite well."
"I guess." I admitted.
"Given what you know, do you think she would be a good addition to our division?"
"Yes, I do."
"It may or may not surprise you, Miss Monroe, but I also believe Anna Wilson would be a great addition. Okay," He turned his chair and stood. "Would you care to inform Miss Wilson of her pending promotion, or shall I?"
"Um, I ca-can do it?"
"Good. We'll have a vote during our next meeting. Until then she should remain with Engineering, under Bao. Thank you for the hard work, Lieutenant."
"You're welcome?"

So he knew I may struggle with this because of Anna? First, how could he know? Secondly, why did he give me the assignment then?

I may never understand men.

I felt a sense of relief as I sat in my seat on the bridge, watching the path of the Gale as they approached. They were right on the beam, as far as vector, but their speed was a little too fast. If they kept going like this, they'd slide right past us or have to use a lot of fuel doing a retro burn.

"Ensign Kre, please send a message to the Gale. Ask them to gradually slow their approach by about an additional four percent."

"Sent, ma'am." she said a moment later.

"Let me know when they acknowledge, please."

We waited and waited, but no acknowledgement came. At two hundred Kre asked if I wanted to open a voice communication with the Gale. I told her no. In this particular case I would let them burn the extra fuel, it would be fine.

"Can I ask the reasoning behind that, ma'am?" she asked. She appeared to be genuinely curious, not like she was questioning the intelligence of my order.

"I suspect the same crew as before are on duty, Ensign. They have been warned by myself, and Captain Broussard informed me she would talk to them, so if that doesn't do it then maybe having to explain the waste in resources will be helpful. Besides, maybe that will finally make the superiors over there do something about it. I suspect that once Captain Broussard hears that they once again ignored a command from the Freedom she won't be very happy with them."

"And this won't cause any problems for our meet up?"

"It shouldn't. They'll just have to throw on the brakes."

We waited, watching as the Gale got nearer and nearer. Shortly after three hundred we noticed the gale was slowing, but it was much too late. They were having to burn extra fuel to slow. They probably would have had to burn some, anyway, but now they were burning a lot. Such a waste of resources.

I stood to do my part. I had Kre open a voice communication with the Gale, and I waited for them to respond and Kre to give me the nod that they were on.

"UNSC Atlantic Gale, this is OIC Lieutenant Callie Monroe of the UNSC Freedom. We are sending over final coordinates, if you would please nestle up about three thousand meters off our starboard side, that would be most appreciated."

"Lieutenant, this is Captain Broussard." came the reply. "We acknowledge your direction and will comply."

"Thank you, Captain."

"We had to get on the retros pretty hard," she said. "Would you mind explaining why that is?"

"Well, Captain," I said. "Under normal circumstances the Gale would back off the thrusters and let the gravitational pull slow you as

you approached us, ma'am, but that didn't happen this time."

"That part I'm aware of. What I'm less clear on is why that order was never given. While this is our ship, it is customary for the Freedom to give direction regarding final approach. I'd like to know why that was never given in this case. You were aware of this, were you not? Your crew usually stays on top of those things."

"I appreciate your praise for our navigation team. If you would check your message queue you will undoubtedly find that the course corrections were sent and ignored several hours ago."

"My crew tells me we never receive… never mind, I can see the unopened message here in our queue. Thank you for clarifying that, Lieutenant. I shall take this up with my crew."

"You are most welcome, ma'am. Let me add that we welcome the UNSC Atlantic Gale, and it is very good to see you all again."

"Thank you, Freedom. We're happy to see you too. Broussard out."

And that was that. We watched as the Gale finished their final maneuvers, finding the spot I directed them to take position just off our starboard side, and it was all over. I had completed my first rendezvous as OIC.

Kind of lackluster, really.

Before any of us knew it, we were being relieved by the day shift. Milton relieved me as OIC, and Lewis, Cho and Sokolov relieved Kre, Alonso and Teague.

"Lieutenant, please stay a moment." Milton said.
"Yes?"
"One moment."

He went through a couple of screens on his terminal, signing off on some time sensitive documents.

"I got a message from Captain Broussard this morning. We're going to try to begin our training mission late this evening. Would you please make sure your crew is prepared and in the hangar by twenty two hundred?"

"Um, sure. Yes. I will take care of everything, Milton. Have you told Bao or Howard yet?"

"I'll leave that to you, Lieutenant. Please keep me informed if there are any problems."

"Yes, sir. I better get on that as soon as possible so people have

a chance to get ready. If that's all?"

"Yes, go."

I wasn't expecting to have to be ready so soon. I assumed we would wait a day or two after the rendezvous before heading over. Now I was going to have to prep on the fly.

I decided I better tell at least Bao in person. Everyone else I could send a message to, but her I wanted to clear things with before stepping out any airlocks.

Down the stairs to deck six, then the length of the ship to the Engineering department. Once there, I found myself in the familiar situation of walking into a busy place and being mostly ignored as I searched around for Bao.

The place was hopping that morning. There were already at least half a dozen people in the middle of what appeared to be time consuming equipment rebuilds.

I found Bao in her office, for a change. Her eyes were crinkled in concentration as she stared at her screen. She noticed me after a few moments and looked up.

"Good morning, kiddo." she said.

"Hi Bao. When is the earliest the shuttle can be ready to head over to the Gale?"

"Thumper is ready right now, we just need to fill the fuel and go. Why?"

"Milton would like us to head out tonight, if possible. Will you be able to accommodate that?"

"I don't see any problems with that. I'll need to reschedule a couple of people, but that won't be difficult."

"Okay, good. Should I have everyone meet at the shuttle bay, or do you think we should gather somewhere first to go over things?"

"You're OIC of this mission, kiddo. It's your call."

"Um, let's just have them meet at the bay. I can give a quick briefing if I need to, but I don't know that we'll need to do a whole lot before we get there."

"Sounds good, Lieutenant." she said.

"Great. I'll let the others know. See you then."

"Hang on there," she said. I turned and saw a crooked grin on her face. "You've now had *two* dates with one of my Chiefs."

"Oh yeah, and we're selecting Anna to replace Howard."

"Fantastic." she said, a bit of sarcasm coming through. "It doesn't matter, I'll make it work. It's a great move for her. But tell me about the dates."

"Bao, I… what makes you think we went on dates? They weren't dates."

"Uh-huh." she said. "From the way she has looked each time, I don't get the feeling Anna had quite that same view."

"Why, what did she say?"

"Oh it wasn't anything she said so much as the glow she exuded afterward."

"You're imagining things." I said.

"Really? Kiddo, you two have been making eyes at each other for years."

"Have not!" I protested. Had we? Had *I*?

"If you say so." she said, laughing. "For what it's worth, I think your parents would approve."

What was she talking about? My parents would approve of what, exactly? Anna? I'm sure my parents would really like her, everyone else does, but what did that have to do with anything?

"Sorry, I didn't mean to drag them into this." she told me, her tone now more serious.

"So, um, you don't think they'd be upset?" I asked her.

"They'd be glad you found someone so nice and thoughtful." Then she let out a bark of laughter. "Well, your dad may have been very angry that you didn't wait until you were older before you started dating. Maybe thirty."

"Thanks, Bao." I said. I shook my head hard and wiped at my eyes. "But Anna is just a friend. I'm not even–"

"Don't *even* try to convince me you're straight, Callie. I know you too well."

"I, uh, gotta get going." I told her. I wiped my eyes again. "I need to inform, um, Chief Wilson… about her promotion."

"She should be at home by now. If you hurry, you may catch her before she goes to sleep. Good luck, kiddo."

I stopped by to inform Obalesh that Anna and I would not be able to make it that night. He took it well.

"Young Callie," he said. "Your duty must first be to the ship, for the safety and wellness of all who make this our home. That encompasses the whole of the children which we support. May you and Miss Anna be well on your journey."

I thanked him, then made my way from his worship center, down the passageway toward the front of the ship, then up to deck nine, to the Wilson's quarters. I buzzed the door and waited.

"Yes?" Jonathan Wilson said, as the door slid open. "What can I do for you this morning, Calliope?" he asked, his eyes narrowing on me.

"Hi Mister Wilson. May I come in?"

"Please." he said, stepping aside. "Is there something you needed to speak about, Calliope?" he asked.

"I need to speak to Anna, sir."

He stared at me, his eyes blazing in anger for some reason. I was so uncomfortable. I used to respect this man, but lately… I just didn't know. What happened to him?

"My daughter is sleeping." he finally told me.

"It's important. Can I just wake her for a moment."

"I said she is asleep. You will have to come back later."

"Mister Wilson,"

"Please go now, Calliope." he said, a little too loudly.

I heard a loud bang and saw Jonathan turn his head as I was turning mine. There was a muffled declaration of pain or surprise, then Anna's head popped out from her doorway down a short passageway that led from the living room.

"Callie!" she said. She came out to us, hurrying along as she rubbed her head.

"What was that sound?" her father asked her. "Did you hit your head?"

"Yeah," she said. She grimaced and smiled at the same time. "I guess I was hurrying too much and the door wasn't completely open yet."

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I'm fine." she told me. She turned to her father. "Can we be alone?"

"You were going to bed." he scolded her.

"It won't take but a minute." I said. "And he can hear this too."

"Oh." she said. She glanced up at her father, but returned her attention to me. "How was overnight on the bridge?"

"Good. We rendezvoused with the Atlantic Gale. Um, I spoke with Milton, and they want us to head across to the Gale this evening

at twenty two hundred."

"Oh. Okay. Yeah." she said, continually glancing sideways at her father as she spoke to me. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?" she asked.

"There actually is." I said, smiling.

She smiled and relaxed for a moment, then tensed up again. Her face was in my direction, but her eyes were cutting straight sideways at her father.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Well," I said, trying to appear serious as I gazed up into her eyes. Those wonderful, beautiful eyes.

Sigh.

"Um," I said again. "Congratulations are in order." I told her. "Milton and I discussed it, and he's going to put your name in for promotion."

"What?!" she asked, her eyes returning to me as her whole face became one big smile.

"Barring any unforeseen dissent from the officers aboard, you will be elevated to lieutenant second class and become third officer at the next crew meeting. At that time you'll move to Command."

"Oh my God!" she screamed out. "That is great news!" She paused for a second and looked down at me. "We'll be in the same division!"

She grabbed onto me, wrapping me in a hug, as she bounced and laughed in joy. I couldn't help but get caught up in her happiness, and I was also laughing and overjoyed.

Of course part of my joy came from being held so closely by her.

"Anna!" Jonathan snapped.

She let go of me and stepped back, her smile fading only slightly. I immediately felt the loss from her missing body heat.

"I think it is time you go, Calliope!" Jonathan said sternly.

"Uh, I need to get some sleep anyway." Anna said.

"Yes, me too." I agreed.

"Like you sleep!" she said, snorting. She turned red, apparently

embarrassed from the snort of laughter.

"I do sometimes." I told her.

"Good day, Calliope." Jonathan said.

"Bye, sir." I said, waving toward Anna as I headed to their door. "Oh, Anna,"

"Yes?" she asked.

"Be at the shuttle bay by twenty two hundred."

"I'll be there. I hope you sleep well, Callie."

"You too!" I said.

As their door was sliding shut, I thought I heard Jonathan saying something to her about not mentioning before that I would be going on this trip with her.

As I headed up the passageway, back toward my quarters, I pulled my tablet out. I unfolded it and sent off a priority message to all the away crew. I sent it with a reply required, so that I could personally contact anyone who hadn't replied later on in the day.

I sat in my quarters, watching as the replies came in from everyone within just a short time. And I thought. Of that warm hug. Of that beautiful smile.

Sigh.

What was I going to do?

Mark was right, I needed to talk to Milton about this. And not just a passing conversation. Obviously he wasn't worried about me being biased against Anna, but I could use his advice.

How could I handle being the superior officer in the same division as someone who I care about so much?

And on a more personal note: How do I handle it from here? Should I tell her how I felt? What if she completely shot me down, or laughed at me?

I couldn't handle that.

But what if she didn't shoot me down? Could Bao be right, and Anna was also interested in me? I didn't even know how that was possible.

It wasn't.

It just couldn't be.

Wishful thinking, that's all it was. And no matter what Bao said or thought, me wanting that to be true wouldn't make it true. Bao was just teasing me, that's all.

Right?

## Chapter Seven

I was in the shuttle bay a full two hours before our scheduled launch time. I wanted to make certain to look over the shuttle carefully. I had only been on it a handful of times, and I needed to know more about it and to be aware of every single part of it.

I was a little distracted at first. And upset. When I slid open my door to go down to the shuttle bay there was a NOCO flier stuck to it. It condemned the *homosexual lifestyle,* and encouraged gays to ask for forgiveness for choosing such an evil path in life, and to correct their way of living.

To say I was insulted would only be stating the very obvious. I knew the flier violated at least four regulations, too, but proving who placed it there would be very difficult. And even if I did, it would just result in a big argument.

What worried me more, I guess, was that they seemed to be targeting me specifically with it. I didn't see a flier like that one on any other doors. Maybe they handed them out at their meetings, I don't know, but I had never seen one before. It also carried the veiled threat that those who didn't make better choices would be dealt with, one way or another, by the *righteous agents of God*.

So yeah, it was upsetting.

But I shook it off as best I could, and I buried myself in work. I was pretty sure Jonathan Wilson put it there, but arguing with Sally again was the last thing I wanted. Plus, I didn't want to cause problems with me and Anna. Or problems *for* Anna, especially.

The away crew started showing up at twenty one hundred. Bao had actually been there with me the entire time, prepping the shuttle. The Thumper. Everyone else showed around twenty one hundred. Mostly they just lounged around the shuttle bay, waiting.

At twenty one forty five I sent Ensign Ailanna Pok around to tell everyone to gather near the front of the Thumper. Five minutes later, Bao and I headed out for a quick preflight briefing.

"Okay everyone," I said. People were still chattering back and forth with each other, seemingly not hearing me. "I need your attention."

Bao cleared her throat and nudged me. When I looked at her, she gestured with her hand for me to speak up, and made a facial expression that I interpreted as her wanting me to be more assertive.

Right. Okay.

Apparently Milton had her in on teaching me how to be a leader. Either that, or she was just taking it upon herself. So I knew Milton would never need to get very assertive, people just listened to him. That didn't always work for me. Bao would rip them a new one, swearing in three languages while doing it. That definitely wouldn't work for me.

"Hey!" I shouted. "If you're going, you are going to listen up first." I made an effort to look angry, and like I meant it when I said people who didn't pay attention wouldn't be going.

It worked.

People quieted and turned my direction. It was good. I had their attention.

Now what?

Oh, right.

"We'll be boarding as soon as I'm done here. The trip across to the Gale will take about an hour. The Gale doesn't have a shuttle bay capable of housing Thumper, so we'll be docked belly to belly on the outside of their ship. That means when we transition from Thumper to the Gale we're going to be upside down. It may be disorienting, so be careful."

"I've done this before." Bao added. "Twice. There is a gravity inversion there, and for a moment it feels like you're being squished down from both sides. It can cause hellish queasiness, so when going through the best way to handle it is to go quickly and not think about

it too much."

"Everyone should have their training materials prepared?" I suggested.

I scanned over the crowd, reading nods from some, looks of assuredness from others, indicating they all were prepared.

Even Anna. Her crystal eyes shined at me, and I noticed for the first time that there were little brown splotches along the edge of her irises. Not enough to detract from the beauty, though. No, it somehow made her eyes even prettier.

"We're going to be there just over two days." Bao said, when I didn't continue.

"Uh, yes," I said, breaking away from Anna's eyes. How long had I been staring? "Captain Broussard sent me a message with an outline of what she would like covered, as well as a tentative schedule. I see no problems with it, but if any of you notice anything then feel free to point it out. I'll send a copy over to you in a moment. Are there any questions?"

Everyone either shrugged, or looked around at the rest of the assembled crew. All except Roger Howard. He spent the whole time scowling at me.

"Then everyone get on board. Bao is piloting, I'll be taking the copilot seat. The rest of you can sit wherever you like."

Nobody moved for a moment. I was about to shout at them, but I didn't need to. As soon as Anna stepped toward the ship, the rest followed. It was kind of like there was a delayed reaction to following my command.

"I can't have that in an emergency."

"Can't have what, kiddo?" Bao asked.

"Oh, I… did I say that aloud? I just noticed there was a delay from when I told them to board before they finally headed that way."

"Yeah, but they just aren't used to you giving the orders. Maybe they weren't sure you were finished." she suggested.

"Maybe."

We had left the engines warming, so it didn't take long to continue the preflight readiness routine before departure. Just a few minutes. We were ready to go by straight up twenty two hundred.

Thumper was not overly large, at around five meters wide and fifteen long, with a flight deck/crew level on top and a small cargo hold below, which ran only half the length of the ship, the remaining space being devoted to propulsion and electronics. The crew space had a pair of seats in front for the pilot and copilot, as well as five seats down each bulkhead for crew. At the back were two small rooms–each with a bunk bed and room for little else–divided by a small passageway, at the end of which was a decent sized bathroom.

At least the interior was a pretty sapphire color, not the utilitarian grey of the mining shuttles.

"Um, so… ready to, um… go?" I asked Bao.
"Whenever you are, Lieutenant."
"Okay. Um… we should message the OIC."
"You're running this show, kiddo." she said, smiling. She nodded to the comm panel.

Right. I was in charge here. Wow. So that meant making the call was my responsibility, too. I used the comm panel to open a direct channel to the Freedom bridge.

"UNSC Freedom, this is Lieutenant Callie Monroe, OIC for the shuttle Thumper, currently located in your shuttle bay. Requesting clearance to depart."
"You're good to go, Thumper." Chester Rowe's voice responded. "Safe trip Thumper."
"Thanks, Chester." I said. "See you soon." I turned to Bao. "Um, take us out, Commander."
"Yes, ma'am."

Ma'am?

I was junior to her. She *should not* call me ma'am. Not even if I was OIC. But I kind of liked it.

As Bao ramped up the engine power, I could see a blue haze forming around the ship. Artifacts from the small ion engines that powered Thumper. They were not nearly as clean burning as the main engines on Freedom.

I entered the codes to open the shuttle bay doors. There was an alarm, alerting anyone on the bay to leave the area immediately or

risk being exposed to the vacuum of space. After a moment, the doors slid open.

It was beautiful. Space. Too often our view of it was through a tinted glass. No matter how clean and clear we tried to keep them, no glass was perfect, and no view was. This was the closest I had seen in person. Sure, I'd seen vids, but sometimes seeing it just reminded me how much beauty there was in the universe. All the stars in the distance, and the slight glow from nearby planets. Even the light of this system's star, glaring off the Gale… it was all so majestic and wonderful.

Bao pulled back on the controls and Thumper lifted up. There was a slight sensation of movement before Thumper's gravity generator equalized things, then nothing. Even as we moved toward the opening of the bay doors, no actual feeling of movement could be noticed.

"Clear." Bao told me.

"Right." I said, waking up. I keyed the comm panel again. "Thumper is away, Freedom. We're clear of the ship."

"Pleasant journeys, Thumper." Chester's voice echoed over the speakers. "Party for everyone at Spanky's when you get back. Drinks are on me."

"Sounds great, Commander," I said. "Just remember to make that sodas for a few of us, okay?"

"That's right, you've got some younguns on board, don't you?" he said. "We'll keep that in mind. Have a great trip."

"Thanks. Thumper out."

We drifted along, toward the Atlantic Gale. I allowed myself just a couple more minutes to take in the sights, then began concentrating on the job. I needed to verify that I had all my materials ready to go on my tablet before we got far from Freedom. I'd still be able to access the network from the Gale, but I'd lose secure channel before long and would have to go through some security hurdles.

After verifying my videos and files were ready to go, I started concentrating on the Gale's exterior. I admit that I did not know quite as much about the Gale as I would have liked to. I knew quite a bit, but most of my time had been spent thinking about, and studying, the Freedom.

I had seen the Gale from afar many times. I had even seen

close up pictures and engineering diagrams of it. What I hadn't seen, before then was the deep scarring along the outside, or the burn marks from a long ago fire. The Gale's hull, while thick and safe, was made from a different alloy than Freedom's, and it showed.

Bao cleared her throat and eyed the comm panel again. I took my cue and reached for it.

"UNSC Atlantic Gale, this is the shuttle Thumper from UNSC Freedom. We are approaching your underside, heading for–"

There were several noisy conversations going on behind me, coming from the crew. I hit mute on the comm panel and swiveled toward them.

"I need quiet, guys." I said. Their conversations didn't end. "Hey!" I snapped. "Cut the noise!"

That quieted them. Apparently if I was stern they got the idea. I'd have to remember that. Even though I found it hard to do and it really wasn't my personality.

"Approaching lock…" I zoomed the view of the forward facing camera. "Lock twenty one eighty seven."

"Roger that, Thumper. You are a go." a voice came back.

"Set us down, Bao." I told her.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Should you be calling me that?" I asked her, not speaking loudly because I didn't want the others to hear. "I may be OIC, but you're still superior."

"Just trying it on for the day when you take over for Captain Nelson." she said, shooting me a wink.

Bao zeroed in on the outer lock to maintenance port 2187. We slowed our approach to such a slow rate that I had to view the readouts on my monitor to see the progress as we edged closer and closer at about four centimeters per second, much slower than the safe approach speed. There was, finally, a slight thwunk sound as the seals between the two ships touched.

"We have soft seal." Bao said.

A moment later there was a slight jarring, followed by a banging sound, as we made full impact with the Gale. Bao punched

several controls on her screen, and several of the red lights across the control panels turned a bright green, followed by a light buzzing sound.

"We have hard dock." she told me.

"Atlantic Gale, this is Thumper. We have hard dock at lock twenty one eighty seven."

"Roger, we have confirmation that your hard lock is good. Welcome to the Atlantic Gale, Thumper. Someone should be down to answer the door soon."

Bao and I went through the shutdown routine. You can't simply flip the off switch on an operating shuttle, there is a set of steps that need to be taken to make sure everything is shut down correctly, and we went through a quick check to verify we'd be ready to leave when the need arose.

"Okay, crew," I said. I stood and turned to face them. "We'll head down below in an orderly fashion. I want everyone to stick together for now. Captain Broussard will be assigning us rooms for the remainder of our stay. If you–"

"Puh!" Lieutenant Howard said. "I don't need to hear this, let me through." he said, shoving his way past several crewmembers.

"I'm not done yet, Lieutenant." I told him. Butt munch.

"I don't have to listen to your pedantic ramblings anymore, you spoiled little bitch." he said, actually laughing.

"Hey!" Anna said. I looked over at her and saw her eyes were full of anger.

"I'm not part of your crew any longer." He said.

"You haven't officially been transferred as yet, Lieutenant." Bao reminded him.

"And you're still on *my* shuttle." I reminded him.

"Whatever." he said.

"You *will* show respect, Lieutenant." Bao told him.

"Or what?" he asked.

I'm not sure what exactly he saw in the look on her face, but after a moment of her staring him down, his body language completely changed. He went almost limp as he turned toward me.

"I apologize, Lieutenant Monroe." he told me. It looked delightfully painful. "I'm just anxious to join my new ship."

"Please go, Mister Howard. And tell the Gale crew who is waiting for us that we'll be along in a moment, please."

“Yes, Lieutenant.” he said.

He lifted a hatch in the deck, just opposite the main door, and slid down a ladder into the cargo bay. A moment later I could hear the clunk as he opened the hatch between our shuttle and the Gale.

“Okay, I think we can all head in. Have fun, but try to do a good job training these people. They need your expertise. Head on in.”

“Watch the gravitational inversion.” Bao reminded them.

I indicated that the others should go first, and they streamed out in an orderly fashion, down the ladder to the cargo bay, and obviously onto the Gale.

All except for Anna and Bao. Anna stayed behind and let the others pass. When they had gone, she stepped up near us.

“Isn’t the OIC supposed to go first when exiting the bridge, Callie?” she asked me, humor crossing her face.

There was no regulation, procedure, or practice that actually required an OIC to be the first to leave the bridge. I could think of many cases when I led the way when Milton and I exited the bridge together. Still, most of the time the crew did allow the captain or OIC to exit first, out of respect.

“I asked them to go.” I responded. “That includes you, Anna.”

“I know,” she said, a full grin crossing her face. “I just wanted to wait until you were ready so I could make sure you made it safely.” She stepped over to the ladder. “Coming?” she asked, her eyes twinkling in amusement as she peered back at me.

“Yes, um, I, um, com… am coming.”

“I’ll wait for you below, then.”

Anna slid down the ladder as I watched from above. When I was finally able to tear my eyes away, I glanced toward Bao. She was staring at me, giving me some kind of ‘told you so’ look.

“What?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing.” she said, shaking her head. “I’m heading over.”

I heard Bao say something to Anna below, but I couldn’t understand what it was. All I know is that when I got down there, Bao had already crossed over to the Gale, and Anna had a surprised look

on her face.

"You first, Callie." Anna said. "I'll be right behind you."
"Um, thanks."

It was true that there was a strange sensation when passing through the lock from Thumper to the Gale. Kind of an odd pressure, and a sense of vertigo as the gravity pulled half of me down and the other half up. It was weird, but not nauseating.

It did take a moment for my eyes to focus in the super bright bay. It was like the light was as bright as a sun. Coming from the slightly dimmed lighting on the Thumper, it was nearly blinding.

"I'm told the captain is named Monroe?" a voice asked.

I was able to see, after several seconds of focusing, an ensign on a stairway across from us. He was leaning on the hand rail, holding an actual old fashioned clipboard.

Filled with *papers*, from what I could tell.

Such a waste of resources, given that everyone had their tablets and a digital copy uses nearly zero resources, while paper must be made or recycled.

"I'm Lieutenant Monroe, OIC for this mission." I told him.
"Whatever." he said, shrugging. "Captain Broussard said you should go to your rooms until the morning. I have your room assignments and schedules." he said. He stepped off the stairs and extended the clipboard to me.
"Thank you." I told him.
"Whatever." was his reply. He turned toward the stairs. "Follow me."

I gave Bao a glance and she appeared as unsettled by this ensign's demeanor as I was. I gave my crew a nod and extended my hand to signal they should all follow him.

The Ensign, who had not given his name yet, guided us up five flights of stairs, then down a passageway with many doorways, all closed.

"Commander Xiang, so good to see you again!" a woman with

no insignia said as we passed.

"Alicia?" Bao said. "Good to see you again. I look forward to more of your lemon bread."

"I'll make a batch just for you." the woman, apparently Alicia, told Bao.

The woman turned and continued on, as did my crew. A moment later the ensign stopped in front of a doorway.

"Monroe and Xiang here," he said, pointing to a door. "Smith and Mehmet in the next room, then Vanwinkle and Switzer, followed by Wilson and Pok." He mispronounced her name Poke. "Billups and Gershawn in the next. Deon and Kang may join you later on in the next rooms. "

"Thank you, Ensign." I said.

"Whatever." was his response.

He disappeared down the passageway, leaving the rest of us waiting there, everyone looking to me. Even Roger Howard.

"Everyone go on to your rooms." I told them. "Try to get some sleep, it'll be a long day tomorrow. Uh, our schedule," I looked at the paper on the clipboard. "We're supposed to be at some place called Carmella's Bakery at nine hundred for breakfast with Captain Broussard."

"That's a nice place." Bao told me. "I ate there last time."

"I'll see everyone in the morning." I said, dismissing them.

"What about me?" Lieutenant Howard asked, as nearly everyone else disappeared into their rooms.

"Well, uh," I said. He was not listening to me, though, and instead watched Bao. "Howard!" I snapped. He made me so angry sometimes!

"Yes?" he asked, finally turning toward me.

"Ya know what, I know this isn't how this is supposed to go, but I'm going to sign you off the roster of the Freedom. Go on your way, Lieutenant."

"So where am I supposed to go?" he asked.

I pulled out my tablet, pulled up his service record, and marked him as transferred. I signed it quickly, adding a note that I had authorized it without Captain Broussard officially accepting him into her crew, and that her failure to do so in a timely manner would nullify my order.

It did not technically meet the regulations, but it was close enough that I didn't think anyone would argue.

"You may go, Lieutenant." I told him, urging him to do so as soon as possible with my eyes.

"But–"

"You have your orders, Mister Howard." Bao told him.

"Where do I go?"

"That's not my problem." I informed him.

When Bao and I entered our shared room, Howard was still standing in the passageway with a stupefied look on his face. I hoped he would leave soon.

The room was spartan, to say the least. No carpet or bulkhead hangings, no chairs, no desk–nothing much except for a pair of bunk beds and a small table. At least there was an attached bathroom, which amounted to a shower and toilet combo.

"Are these guest quarters, or holding cells?" I asked Bao.

"They aren't quite as comfortable as what I got last time, that's for sure." she said. "Top bunk or bottom?" she asked me.

"Um,"

I looked at the bunkbeds. The top bunk was only maybe a meter above the bottom bunk. The bottom bunk was mostly open on one side, but sat against the bulkhead. It was a tight space, and I could feel my heart rate increasing as I looked at it.

"I'll take the bottom." Bao told me, reaching up to squeeze my shoulder. "I forgot that you hate small spaces."

"I don't *hate them*." I told her. "Sometimes I get a little claustrophobic is all."

"Eun-ji would too. I guess you get it from her."

"Yeah, I guess."

My mother was claustrophobic? I had no idea. Nobody had ever told me that before. I kind of wonder what else I share with her.

"Sorry you weren't assigned a room with Anna," Bao told me in a teasing tone. She tossed her bag on the deck beside the bed. "I'm sure she's pissed as well."

"I never, uh, said–"

"I'm grabbing a shower, then some shut eye. Need to use the

head before I do?"

"Uh… no."

I sat on the top bunk and stared across at the bare bulkhead. This whole thing seemed rather unprofessional to me. A captain should meet an incoming crew. At the very least, send a personal message down. Especially when they were coming to train your crew, doing you a favor.

We had no rooms that bad on the entire ship on the Freedom. I had no idea why those were so poor, but I couldn't imagine ever giving any guests, let alone visiting crew, bunkbeds.

How do you get to the point of telling an incoming OIC which of her crew share rooms? I was actually a little bit insulted. The only thing keeping me from feeling completely insulted was the fact that the captain herself didn't seem to take our arrival as all that worthy of her attention. So maybe she really didn't think much about this.

But why did we have an ensign, who did not even introduce himself, being so rude to us? I would have had someone doing grunt work for weeks for treating a visiting crew that way.

Oh well. I refused to take it personally.

At least I tried not to.

Bao came back in from her shower. She stood in the small space, rubbing her hair with a towel, and stared at the same bulkhead I was.

"What are you looking at, kiddo?" she asked, turning toward me.

"Hm? Oh, nothing in particular. Just thinking about how awful this ship seems to be running right now. They've been rude every time I contact them, we're met by an ensign and not the captain when we board, they assign rooms instead of letting us select for ourselves, and they don't respond to orders. Have they always been like this?"

"Can't say as they have." she said. "Must be going around. My own damn crew has been pretty incompetent lately, too."

"Not all of them."

"No, I have a couple of gems in my crew. Your girl, for one."

"She's not–"

"Unfortunately, you're taking her away from me."

"That was Milton's doing!"

"Uh-huh. Whatever you need to tell yourself, kiddo."

My tablet was beeping with a priority voice communication coming from the Freedom. I punched the button to open the channel.

"Lieutenant Monroe." I said.

"Lieutenant, this is Commander Rowe,"

"What is it, Chester?" I asked.

"I knew you'd want the latest data coming in from our probes."

"Yes?"

"That was indeed a moon, as you suspected."

"And?" I asked, getting excited.

"So far we're not sure, but there are some good signs that we may be able to extract some iron, as well as possibly some hydrogen."

"Good!" Bao said. "We need that hydrogen."

"That is excellent news, Chester!" I told him.

"Thought you'd like to hear that. I'm going to discuss it with Captain Nelson in the morning, when he comes to relieve me."

"Relieve you?" Bao said into my tablet. "You're pulling a double? What the hell did you do to get screwed like that, Commander?"

"Aww, first officers don't get screwed, Commander." he said. "We just get the *privilege* of covering a second straight shift when the division is down one officer, two call in sick with the runners, and the third officer is off galavanting on another ship."

"Chief Johns and Chief Landao are both sick?" I asked.

"That's what they claim, anyway." he said. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know about the data, Lieutenant. We're still getting more data back, but it sounds like you were right about it. There may be some good minerals and ore we can mine there, so good job."

"Thank you, Chester."

"Have a good time over there."

Bao climbed into the bottom bunk and it was less than three minutes before I heard snores coming from her. I guess the lack of competence of the Gale's crew didn't worry her enough to keep her awake. Nor did she seem too excited about the moon we had just discovered.

I always wished I could sleep like that. Most nights I just gave up and kept myself busy, either working or reading. Sometimes I watched old movies.

But that night I was thinking about that moon. There could be a wealth of supplies there. And it was good, we had been needing to stock up. Of course we always tried to extract whatever we could whenever we found anything, but we had been especially low on hydrogen.

It just occurred to me then that we usually let the person who discovers something name it. Did that mean I got to name it? So what should I name the thing?

The message icon blinked on my tablet. From Anna. I hurried to read it.

'*Tight rooms. How are you feeling?'*

Aww, how thoughtful. I sort of wished she hadn't reminded me, though.

'*Trying not to think about it. Doing okay, though. Thank you for asking.'* I replied.
'*Try to get some sleep, Sweet Little Callie. Goodnight.'*
'*Goodnight.'* I replied.

I tried to relax and do more review of my training materials, but the bulkheads were starting to close in on me. My heart rate was already up, and my breathing was getting shallow. I dug into my bag and found my Amblipen. I took a pill and, knowing it would take a while to kick in, slid off the top bunk and quietly made my way into the passageway.

The passageway was long and gray.

Boring.

Tight.

I made my way opposite the direction of the stairs that led to the bay we entered from. I walked for several minutes before the passageway opened into a larger lounge area, populated by a handful of weary-eyed ensigns and crewmen.

"Excuse me, crewman," I said, stopping near a young man who looked barely older than I am.
"Ma'am?" he said, standing and facing me. "What can I do for

you?"

"Direct me toward the bridge, please."

"I'm sorry…" his eyes panned to my insignia. "Lieutenant. Captain Broussard doesn't ordinarily like people on the bridge without prior authorization. I'm sorry."

"I have authorization, crewman. I'm here to help train your crew."

That was sort of true. I mean I *was* there to train them, though Captain Broussard never gave me express permission that particular time to enter the bridge.

"Is it alright with you if I verify that, ma'am?" he asked. He seemed very upset to have to ask, I must admit.

"Of course." I told him.

"Whitman!" a female ensign barked. "You are not waking the captain to ask if Miss Monroe can access the bridge."

"Sorry, Miss Sanchez." Whitman said.

"The bridge is right up this passageway," Ensign Sanchez said, pointing behind her. "At the top of the stairway, ma'am."

"Thank you, Miss Sanchez." I said. I started past her.

"You are very welcome, Miss Monroe. It's a pleasure to have you here to help us out, ma'am."

She stepped aside and I made my way up the passageway, then ascended the stairway. The bridge was, as she said, just off the top of the stairway.

The door to the bridge was jammed open with what appeared to be a screwdriver that was wedged between the door and the frame, keeping the slider from actuating. That would not be good on the motors. They would detect resistance and not close, but they would continue to try every few minutes until either the object moved or the motor burned out.

I stood at the doorway, looking in on the crew on the bridge. There were five at that time, all taking seats near the helm. The ranking officer of the group looked to be a chief.

It didn't make me feel any better that the chief had his feet up on the helm station in front of him.

"Chief," I said, taking a step onto the bridge. "How are things going this evening?"

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I think the important question at this point would be who you are, chief."

"Who wants to know?"

"That would be Lieutenant Callie Monroe." I said, giving in enough to let him have that tiny victory to assuage his ego.

"Hmph." was his sole response.

That reply did not make me feel particular good. I had hoped this crew wasn't as incompetent as I had feared, but obviously it was.

"So," he said, turning to the others and away from me. "I told the wench that there was no way in hell that I would be back in time to have dinner with her before I went off."

"Excuse me?" I asked. "What is your name, Chief?"

"Are you still here?" he asked me. "Isn't it past your bedtime, little girl?"

I had not expected that, either. What was this guy's problem? I was used to people not taking me seriously, but this guy was taking it all to a new level.

"Chief, please tell me your name."

"Yeah, tell her your name, Ben." one of the other crewmembers said, laughing.

"So you're the infamous Ben?" I asked. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Mister Pines."

"Huh?" he asked.

"Mister Pines, I look forward to the training we will be doing in the next couple of days."

"She looks *forward to spending time with you, Ben*." one of the others said, and they all burst into laughing fits.

"Are the rest of you supposed to be here?" I asked. "I was under the impression that the bridge crew on the Gale consisted of only three crew. Who is supposed to be here?"

"With all *due* respect, *Lieutenant*," Chief Pines said. "This is not any of your business."

I put my face in my hands and shook my head. Really? How could a crew be so unprofessional? Did Captain Broussard create this mess? And what could I do about it if she did?

"Anyone not on duty at the moment please leave the bridge." I said.

Their laughter and glances at each other were not encouraging. How could this happen?

"That was not a suggestion, gentlemen." I told them.

"Maybe you should be having this conversation with Captain Broussard." Chief Pines said.

"Perhaps you are right. Would you mind paging her to the bridge right now, Chief?"

"It'll wait until the morning." Chief Pines told me, smiling.

"No, Chief, it won't." I said, realizing he wasn't going to contact the captain. "I'll contact her myself, Ensign."

"You do that. Tell Aunt Margaux I said hi."

"The captain is your aunt?" I asked. That explained some things. "Well, I'm pretty sure she isn't going to be happy about this."

"I was leaving anyway, Ben." One of the guys said.

"Yeah, me too." another guy said.

I waited until the others were gone, then eyed the group around the helm. Not the best looking trio. How did this happen?

"Can I speak with you for a moment, Chief?" I asked.

"Go for it." he replied, not looking up at me.

"Alone?"

"Oh, so you want to be alone with me, eh?" he asked. "Sorry, I'm on duty."

"Very well, Mister Pines," I said. "We can speak here. Ben… may I call you Ben? Ben, I find it very difficult to be this judgemental after just having met you, but you just might be the most unprofessional, inappropriate acting, undisciplined chief I have ever seen. You not only have acted inappropriately for your position and duty tonight, you have done so on multiple prior occasions. I intend to take this up with your aunt as soon as possible. With any hopes, you will find yourself demoted, possibly fired, and will not be put in a place to have this influence over others."

"I appreciate that, ma'am." he said, smiling.

"Carry on, Chief."

There was so much to do here. How could we even remotely tackle such unruly crew as this one? Was it even something we should be addressing, really? We weren't specifically invited here for that.

I was still pondering these questions as I made my way back to the room I shared with Bao. I had to think about how this was going

to work. How did I tell the captain that she has got to do something about her crew, that they all suck? Or all of them I had met so far, anyway.

Back in the room, I quietly climbed up on my bunk and tried to sleep. No chance. Instead my mind kept going over and over how terribly undisciplined this crew seemed to be.

It was simple, I just had to tell Captain Broussard my thoughts on things. It was my duty. Also, I would be putting everyone on the Gale in further danger if I did not tell her.

I thought maybe she was just too close to notice how bad it had gotten. Was it possible that things had drifted away so slowly that she just hadn't noticed?

Seemed far fetched.

How would I feel if someone came along and told me that the crew on the Freedom were terrible? Not good. I'd probably be very insulted. Very insulted in the least. And I may even let them know that. I'd defend my crew.

How would Milton handle everything? He'd probably realize he wouldn't fix things by stating the obvious, that instead you have to work toward small nudges in the right direction, and just keep nudging until it gets to a place you can accept.

So I needed to do that? Great. How?

Talk about individual incidents, first of all, I figured. I mean I couldn't ignore Chief Pines, at the very least. And I needed to mention the proper way to greet guests when they arrive.

I just needed to figure out how to do that without insulting the captain or her crew.

I unfolded my tablet and slid out the stylus to take notes.

I woke a couple of hours later, still sitting up with my tablet in my lap. I had been slumping, and my neck and back were already cramped and sore because of it.

I hopped down from the bunk as quietly as I could so as not to

wake Bao. I stretched out as best I could and gathered my tablet up and headed into the passageway.

I paced back and forth, making more and more notes. Before I knew it, I had a very long document covering how I wanted to approach the training. None of it was what I had been planning when we came over, but I had thought back then that the Gale would be running in a disciplined and reasonable manner. I didn't expect it to run as smoothly as Freedom, but I did expect better than what I had ultimately found upon arrival.

Going back to the room for some sleep didn't appeal to me. The room was tight. The Amblipen helped me feel more relaxed, but it didn't completely take away the feelings that things were closing in.

A check on the time showed it to only be four hundred hours. There was probably somewhere on board that had breakfast that early. It was too early for me, usually, but some juice would be nice, and I hadn't seen a juice machine in the lounge when I was there before.

I wasn't sure where things were, but I double checked the schematic on my tablet and was able to find my way down three decks, and toward the stern, where I was able to find a cafeteria that was just beginning to serve breakfast.

There wasn't a line, like in the Freedom's cafeteria, and there was no waiter like in the restaurants on the Freedom. Instead there was a counter that you ordered at, like Taco Rocko on the Freedom. I ordered only one pancake, leaving room for later on with Captain Broussard, and making sure they would cook it on a separate cook surface than the bacon so I wouldn't get bacon grease on it. I added a large hot chocolate, wanting a little warmth that morning. I made my way to a seat and began to review my notes as I ate.

The pancake was wonderful. So much so that I ended up paying much more attention to it than my notes. The hot chocolate was only so-so, but that didn't bother me in the least because of the greatness of the pancake.

When I was finished, I rose and began to look for the recycler. There was none to be found. There was a receptacle that looked as if it used to be the recycler, but it had been blocked off and was no longer in use. Instead there was an old fashioned trash can. I was appalled, of

course, so I asked a passing crewman about it. It turns out on the Gale they would manually drag the trash down to the recycling center, where a group of crew would spend time sifting through the garbage to sort it for recycling. It worked, but our automated system on the Freedom worked better.

I returned to the counter and ordered a juice to go for myself, and decided to order coffees for each of my crew, as well as a few teas in case some of them did not drink coffee. I had them put the cups all in a cardboard carrier, threw in some cream and sugar packets, and hauled the heavy box away.

I could hear what I thought was some stirring in the rooms of my crew as I walked past on my way to the Thumper. Once there, I deposited the drinks, then returned to the passageway to begin waking my crew.

I started with Chief Vanwinkle's room. There were no buzzers on these doors, which seemed odd. I had to resort to knocking, like in the movies, which actually hurt my knuckles after a moment and I switched to smacking my palm against the door.

After a moment a flustered and tired looking Jerry Vanwinkle answered the door, a sheet wrapped around him. He opened the door only a crack, poking his head out.

"Good morning, Lieutenant." he managed. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"Good morning, Chief. I need everyone to assemble on the shuttle for a quick meeting. Could you please get some clothes on and come as soon as you can?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Casual is okay for now, this is an informal meeting. You'll be able to come back to get ready before heading off for your training."

"Yes, ma'am." he said.

I was able to glance past him just enough to see a set of painted toenails poking up in the bottom bunk. I was a little surprised at first, but then it occurred to me that there was no reason for me to be. He was not married, and I didn't even know if he was dating anyone.

"That wouldn't happen to be any of my crew in there, would it?" I asked him.

“Civilian, ma’am.” he said, his face coloring.

“Ah. Well, tell Audry I said good morning, if she’s awake. We’ll be waiting for you in the shuttle, Mister Vanwinkle.”

I banged on each door in turn, letting them all know that there was a quick meeting I needed them to attend. I did not, however, inform them there would be coffee for them.

I waited on the Thumper for my crew to arrive. Anna was the first, even beating Bao.

“Good morning, Callie.” she said, smiling brightly.

“Good morning. How did you sleep?” I asked her.

“Okay. Not a lot, though.”

“Coffee or tea?” I asked, pointing at the box with the drinks.

“Oh wow. Uh, coffee.”

“Creamer, sugar?” I asked, reaching for the cup.

“No thanks, dear.” she said, laughing. “Sorry, that was… funny in my head.” She reached out for the cup. “I’ll take four sugar, or if you have artificial sweetener I’d rather have that.”

“Actually, I think this is all artificial.” I said, handing her the packets.

“Calorie free.” she mumbled, ripping open the packets and dumping them in. “Thanks. It was sweet of you to get us all coffee.”

“You are welcome.”

The rest of the crew started clamoring in then, and we didn’t have a chance to talk any more. I spent the next couple of minutes handing out coffee and tea. There were two who wanted tea, Bao and Chief Vanwinkle. I was surprised, I thought Bao would want coffee.

“Okay everyone,” I said. “I know we’re supposed to have breakfast with Captain Broussard at nine hundred to go over the training, but I wanted a moment to go over a few things with you first. I did some thinking last night, and I made my way to the bridge to speak to some of the crew, and I made a couple of observation that I’d like to share. First off, they are undisciplined. It is not our duty to correct that, so we’re going to have to work with it as best as we can. This may mean downgrading some of your training, because they may not be ready for advanced topics. I want you to really push them on the basics to make sure they have a solid foundation before you move on. You’re going to have to let some of their undisciplined tendencies go a little, so try not to get too frustrated.”

“Are they *that bad,* ma’am?” Ensign Pok asked.

“At least some of them are, Ensign. You may have noticed the way the ensign who showed us to our rooms last night acted. Anyway, I have every confidence that you will all do a wonderful job showing the discipline and professionalism that you are known for. Be a good example for them to learn from. And whatever the captain tells us, I want you to remember this discussion. If she asks too much, agree with her, then bring it to me and let me deal with it.”

I spent a few more minutes talking about how rude and unprofessional the crew of the Gale was, and about how they had acted up to this point.

I left them with the assignment of reviewing their lessons for appropriateness for the Gale’s crew, reminding them to not focus too much on advanced topics until they were absolutely certain the fundamentals were understood.

“You got all that from the few interactions you’ve had with the crew so far?” Bao asked, before going.

“Yeah. I mean it’s a gut feeling that it’s across the whole crew, but I think they are especially undisciplined, and I don’t imagine their training and preparedness is an exception to that.”

“Okay, kiddo. I trust your instincts.” She raised her tea cup to me and started to go, but turned back. “Mind if I grab one of those coffees that remain?”

“That’s why I got them.”

It felt good to hear her say that she trusted my instincts.

## Chapter Eight

At the appointed hour, my crew and I gathered outside Carmella's Bakery to meet Captain Broussard for our scheduled breakfast meeting. A quick look inside verified that Captain Broussard was already there, and I waved my crew inside as I walked toward the table the Captain had staked out for us.

I personally would have waited for my guests, but who was I to question a captain?

"Good morning, Captain." I said.

"Lieutenant," she said, nodding. She made eye contact with each of my crew as they gathered around the table. "Please, all of you, have a seat."

"Thank you, Captain." I said.

I sat, indicating to my crew that they should each follow. I thought it strange that Bao moved a seat away from me, leaving the seat beside me empty. Anna ended up being the one standing on the other side of Bao, and she stepped in and took the empty seat.

"Captain Nelson has nothing but praise for you, Lieutenant." Captain Broussard said. "It's so good to finally get to meet you. He's been keeping you to himself."

"Thank you ma'am. He speaks highly of you too, ma'am."

"Where are my manners?" she said loudly. "Please, all of you, eat up."

There were serving trays filled with toast, pancakes, bagels, crackers, cheese, bacon, sausage, and some other mystery meat that I couldn't make out. There were also pitchers of milk, water, orange juice, and a carafe of coffee. There was a bowl filled with various packets of sweetener, butter, creamer, mayonnaise, and nut spread as well. And while we were surveying those items, a waitress brought a pan filled with hash brown potatoes.

Quite a spread.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality, Captain Broussard." I said. "Go ahead and eat guys." I told my crew.

"It's good to see you again, Commander Xiang." Captain Broussard said.

"Yes, good to see you too, Captain." was Bao's reply.

"I don't think I've seen you in five years!"

"Oh, no Captain, I was just here a few months back." Bao told her.

"Of course."

Captain Broussard had a confused look on her face for a moment, but she shook it off. I glanced at Bao and she shrugged.

"Lieutenant, Captain Nelson has nothing but good things to say about you. It's good to finally meet you!"

"Uh, yes ma'am." I said, my stomach sinking. "Good to, uh, meet you too."

Forks, knives and spoon that had begun to scrape against plates as people at the table were eating all stopped. My entire crew were staring at Captain Broussard.

"So I'm told you have training schedules to discuss?" I probed.

"Yes, of course." Captain Broussard pulled her tablet from her lap and started tapping, taking a moment to look up at everyone. "Eat up, ladies and gentlemen."

We continued eating, as confused as we were. I just had a bagel with some nut spread on it. The pancake earlier had left me fairly full.

After twenty minutes of discussing training with the captain, she began to repeat everything from the beginning.

Oh phlegm!

This was not good.

After interrupting the captain to nicely let her know that she had just explained that, we separated to begin meeting with her crew.

My plan was to immediately go to the bridge and start

carefully quizzing people on standard procedures aboard the Gale. I thought I'd do it carefully, having them walk me through the processes I was most familiar with, as well as emergency protocols.

Instead, I was met with Lieutenant Howard as I entered.

"Uh, good morning, Lieutenant Howard." I said.
"It was." he said.
"What are you doing here, if I may ask?"
"*I* belong here." was his reply.
"Is this your shift?" I asked him.
"Unfortunately, I do not have a shift per se. I'm specifically being assigned to head the navigation section, which will occur mainly during the day and off the bridge. In this specific case, though, Captain Broussard has asked me to oversee the training."
"I assumed you'd be assisting." I told him, nodding along.
"No, *you're* the assistant here, Lieutenant. This is now my ship, remember?"
"Of course. Shall we begin?"

Of course *nothing*. I was not only the ranking officer between the two of us, I was also in charge of the training, per agreement between Milton and Captain Broussard. But I'd go along with him, as long as it got things moving in the direction I already wanted to go. Let his ego have this little fake victory, I didn't really care.

–

The morning went well, though I did meet with the occasional resistance from Mister Howard. The fact that he wasn't well versed in the specifics helped me there, because he wasn't able to describe things well enough to really counter anything I said or asked.

The bridge crew who were there were actually much more capable and knowledgeable than I had feared. I was actually feeling somewhat hopeful. Yes, they were undisciplined, but with a firm hand they would probably be a decent crew. Probably *were* until recently, from what I could tell.

What had changed?

After gathering my meal for lunch, I turned toward the cafeteria and scanned for an open table. I saw my crew, nearly all of them, seated at a large table on one side. While there was an opening

there, I liked to eat alone usually. I really did not know most of them very well, anyway. So I headed for the empty table halfway across the room from them.

This is what Milton was talking about, though. Wasn't it? I had seen him eating with the crew. Talking with the crew.

I nervously redirected toward the table holding the majority of my crew. The tables in the Gale's cafeteria were mostly of the picnic table style, with benches along each side. The open spot was at the end, next to Bao. She saw me approaching and slid to the right end, though. That left an opening on her left.

Next to Anna.

It occurred to me that Bao continually kept putting Anna and I next to each other. Her being convinced that I was interested in Anna was getting to be a problem. Even if it was true.

I sat between Bao and Anna, looking down the table to my assembled crew.

"How is everyone this afternoon?" I asked, trying to make nice.
"Good, Lieutenant." a couple of them said at the same time.
"How was your morning, Callie?" Anna asked.

I turned to look at her as best I could, intending to reply. The only thing is, her smile stopped me. Her twinkling eyes were pinned on mine, and I had to look away or risk looking like a fool in front of my crew.

"It wasgoo, exce the Howardsuprise was I got on the bridge." I said.

My heart sank. I couldn't breathe, and when I looked around at my assembled crew I could see the smirk on each of their faces.

"I mean–"
"Lieutenant Howard was there?" Anna asked.
"Um, yeah." I told her, nodding. "H-how is everyone's food? Hopefully as yummy as mine?"
"You haven't touched your food yet," Ensign Pok said. "Ma'am." she tacked on.
"Right, uh," It was so embarrassing. "I mean as yummy as it

was earlier."

"My food is wonderful." Bao said, saving me from further humiliation. "Dr. Gershawn, weren't you telling me your fried rice was the best you've had?"

The crew began talking back and forth, and I felt myself relax after a while. A few managed to work in details from their morning training session, which apparently was similar to mine in that some of the people could be good crewmen if they were just more disciplined. And Dr. Gershawn said the medical was tip top and running very well.

"So, um," I said, interrupting someone else's rant. I had a hard time telling whose, a couple of them were talking at the same time. "If I remember right, Mister Switzer, your mother was ill. How is she doing now?"

"She's doing great, Lieutenant. Thank you for asking. Dr. Burton said he thought they got it all in the surgery, and she should make a full recovery."

"The recovery rate for that type of cancer is over ninety eight percent, if caught early." Dr. Gershawn said.

"That's wonderful!" I said. "She's such a nice lady."

"I'll tell her you said so, ma'am." he said.

Colton's mom was a sweet older lady. She had Colton later in life, and was much older than the majority of the mothers on the Freedom. She was an assistant teacher in school when I was in the lower grades, and she was always so nice to everyone.

The food was very good. Some of the best. After a while, the crew started excusing themselves to go back to training the Gale crew. Eventually, only Bao, Anna and I were left.

"I better get back at it." Bao told me.

"You two have a good afternoon." I said to her and Anna. "I'll be enjoying my time with Mister Howard."

"Sarcasm is so beneath you, kiddo." Bao said, laughing. "Chief Wilson, why don't you stick around and enjoy your lunch? We'll be fine without you for a while."

"Ma'am?" Anna said, glancing at her empty plate.

"I won't expect you for at least an hour."

"I'm done eating, Commander."

"*An hour*, Miss Wilson." Bao said.

Bao left us there alone together. As much as I liked Anna's

company, it seemed awkward.

"Was it really as bad as it sounds on the bridge with Howard?" Anna asked.

"For some reason Lieutenant Howard doesn't like me, and he makes it clear every chance he gets. Other than that, no."

"Howard is a festering puddle of pus, if I may say so."

"Is Engineering okay?"

"Well," she shrugged. "Everything seems to get done, but the place is not organized at all. I asked for their work logs and people looked at me like I was speaking a different language."

"Not good."

"One of the chiefs laughed and told me there hadn't been accurate logs kept in years."

"How is that possible? Milton… *Bao* has been here recently."

"I guess they never spent much time looking at logs." she said with a shrug. "The people there seem to know what they are doing, at least."

"Same as everywhere, then? Just an absolute lack of discipline?"

"Looks like it."

Anna offered to get some dessert for the two of us. She brought back some apple pie. We sat and ate, chatting about some of the funny times we had studying together before.

"And then there was that time you tripped and splattered the entire tray of drinks."

"Oh my… you would bring that up!" I said, laughing. "If you hadn't sat them down *clear across the room,* I wouldn't have had to get them."

"There was chocolate milk all over me, the bulkhead, the carpet, everything! My mother wouldn't let us have any chocolate milk for months."

"I felt so bad about that." I told her. "Did they ever get the stain out of your sweater?"

"No. I grew out of it, anyway, so we just recycled it."

Before I knew it, our time was up and I needed to get back to work.

"Hey, would you like to play some computer games tonight?" Anna asked, just as I was leaving.

"Uh… sure. Of course."

“Great! Just let me know when you have time.”

“Sure.”

“Maybe we can have dinner together some place tonight?” she suggested.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“To, uh,” she glanced around. “Discuss tomorrow’s training, of course.”

“Of course.” I agreed.

“Great! Well you have a wonderful afternoon, Sweet Little Callie.”

“Thanks. You too.”

I swear when I was walking away I heard her mumble something about my age again. I heard something about fifteen, anyway.

–

The rest of the day went similarly. Me finding out that the crew was capable, mostly, just very, very undisciplined. They just didn’t seem to care. They would listen and pay attention when I talked about things, though. Usually.

The strange thing I noticed was that the first officer, Commander Rex Weatherall, seemed as undisciplined as the rest of the crew. He even seemed to actively encourage their behavior, joking with them and tell me to ‘lighten up’ when he caught me chastising one of his crew for rude and sexist remarks he was making to a female crewmember.

On the other hand, later in the day I got to meet Lieutenant Theodore Delveccio, the second officer. He was most helpful. There had been a lot of joking and unprofessionalism going on with the crew that I wasn’t directly working with, but he snapped them right out of it. For some reason, when he came in they all acted exactly as you’d expect a crew to act. It was like night and day, they were so different. Very professional acting, all of a sudden.

With my short experience with the Gale, that was a very refreshing change.

At the appropriate time, I messaged Anna, asking where she’d like to meet for dinner. She said she was waiting for me outside a soup and sandwich shop on the entertainment deck. I hurried to meet up

with her.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Not too bad. Yours?"

"Good. Fabulous."

"Glad to hear it. So, uh," she looked up at the sign next to the door to the sandwich shop. "This place supposedly has wonderful soups and salads, as well as the usual variety of sandwiches. Is that going to be okay with you?"

"Definitely."

The place was like a jolt out of an old movie. There was plastic and chrome everywhere, and the seats were booths like in a diner in an old classic film from the twenty two hundreds. A waitress showed us to seats and took our orders. I ordered a tomato soup with some salad, liberally coated in a vinaigrette, along with a diet soft drink. Anna got the ham sandwich with a batch of fries.

Before I knew it, the waitress was giving us a bill and respectfully nudging us to leave. A check on my tablet showed we had been there ninety minutes. I didn't even remember eating. I didn't remember anything other than talking with Anna and laughing. I couldn't even remember what we talked about.

We moved to a lounge to play our games. We weren't alone, but we found room on a loveseat along one bulkhead, and we chatted while she beat me badly on five straight games of Flighty Hopper.

I was having trouble paying attention to the game. Every time her leg brushed against mine I could feel heat filling my face and chest. My concentration disappeared.

"What is up with you tonight?" she asked, laughing. "You usually slaughter me at that game."

"Uh, lot, um, on my mind." I mumbled.

"Why don't we switch to Invaders? At least we can play together on that one."

"Yeah, sure, sounds good."

Invaders is a game in which you play citizens of a town where new people start to show up, all with weird quirks and a completely different background story. The trick of the game, and the whole point of it, is to figure out which ones are human and which are invading aliens, who conveniently look and sound exactly like humans. You do

this by asking them questions and report the suspected aliens to the local military base. Of course if you're wrong you can be jailed for making false accusations. Wrong too many times, you lose. If you take too long, the aliens overthrow the town and slaughter your family, as well as the rest of the humans in the town.

We synced our games, and took our two characters out into the town to start questioning people. I felt like a complete gorp when I accidentally clicked on the 'report' button when trying to talk to Anna's character.

"Sorry." I told her.
"Hmph!" she said, but she laughed.

We had been playing for a while, stopping twice to get some juice or water to drink, and switching games several times, when the message icon on my tablet blinked. I paused our current game and clicked on the message.

*Are you around? I was hoping to speak with you before I went to sleep, but I'm getting tired and it's getting late.* Bao wrote.

I glanced at the timestamp on the message. Wow! I didn't realize it was that late.

"Oops!" I said. I turned to Anna. "I didn't realize it was nearly midnight!"
"Me either." she said. "I guess we should get back. Not that you'll be sleeping."
"I can try." I told her. "Bao needs to talk to me, anyway."
"Anything wrong?"
"She didn't say. I guess if there was something very wrong she would have mentioned it."

We folded up our tablets and walked slowly back to our area of the ship. We stopped outside Anna's door and she just kind of stood there, staring down at me, a twinkle in her eyes.

"Goodnight." I told her.
"You too. I had a wonderful time tonight, Callie. Thank you."
"Thanks for asking. I had fun, even if you beat me."
"I enjoyed it."
"Yes."
"I wish it were tomorrow already." she said.

"Don't feel like sleeping?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, that's it. I better go give it a shot anyway. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She went into her room and I headed down to the one I shared with Bao.

"Finally. I hope I didn't interrupt anything steamy?" Bao said when I entered. "Actually, I kind of hope I did. At least that would get it over with."

"What's up?" I asked, doing my best to ignore her comments.

"I had another odd situation with the Captain." she said.

"What happened?"

"Just another of those moments where she acted like we were just seeing each other for the first time in years. And then when I corrected her she got very angry with me."

"That's troubling." I said.

"I considered talking to the commander in Medical tomorrow about her, but I didn't want to step on any toes. You're OIC on this mission, I answer to you. Do you want me to talk to him, or would you like to do it?"

"Um, can you do it, Commander? Please?" Calling her commander felt weird, but this was an official situation.

"I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. I just… I don't even know what to ask."

"That's fine. I'm going to get some z's. Have a good night."

"You too."

She squeezed into her bottom bunk, and just watching made me feel like the bulkheads were closing in. I dug in my bag for an Amblipen, downed it, then climbed onto the top bunk.

"I feel like I'm shirking my duty. Like maybe I should be the one talking to the Doctor." I said.

"You have to delegate when you're in charge, kiddo. That's all you're doing."

"Really?"

"Yep. I have to do it all the time."

"Oh."

"Hopefully you can rely on me more than I can rely on some of my stinking… crew." she said, showing a rare amount of restraint in how she described them.

"I'm sure I can. Thanks."

“My turn,” she said. “When are you two going to stop pretending and just admit to everyone you’re dating?”

“Wh-what?” I asked. I sat up quickly.

“Come on, you’ve been seeing each other almost every day.” she said, humor in her voice.

“We’re friends.”

“Why do you sound so defensive every time I mention her, then? Are you going to honestly expect me to believe you two aren’t dating?”

“Yes, because we aren’t! Anna and I–”

“Okay, well, you’re stupid then.”

“Excuse me?”

“That girl is crazy about you!”

The whole conversation had just jumped off the rails. How did I end up talking about this with her? It was ridiculous.

“Are you telling me you don’t like her?”

“Yes, she’s my friend, but–”

“Kiddo, I’ve known you since the day you were born. You can’t hide something like that from me, I can read you like a book.”

“But… I mean…”

Great. So she knew? How long had she known? I thought all this time that she was kidding me because Anna and I were friends. Or because I was so easily embarrassed. Something.

“Well it’s not like it matters.” I sputtered.

“That’s not a denial.” she said.

“No.” I admitted weakly.

“Well don’t sound so glum, she feels the same about you!”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“You’re insane if you believe that.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“She really likes you, kiddo. I can’t even get her to stop talking about you when we’re working.”

“Bao, stop.”

“And she just gushes about how much fun–”

“I… Do I need to make it an order, Commander? I am OIC.”

“Oh fine.”

–

I did manage to go to sleep, and it was wonderful. I got about

three hours, I think. I had amazing dreams about being on a beach, along a massive ocean. There was a blue sky, puffy white clouds, and a cool breeze blowing in. Anna and I were there, sitting on the beach, each holding a nice little drink with ice in it as we soaked in the warm sun.

It was straight out of a movie.

I had no idea what it really felt like to feel the sun on my skin, no idea what sand felt like on my legs, no clue what puffy clouds would really look like with the naked eye. While I did have some idea what a cool breeze may feel like–similar to a cold breeze from the air conditioning I imagine–I had no clue how blue that blue sky would look with my own eyes, and especially how wonderful it would be to sit and hold Anna's hand like I had been in the dream.

I *so* wanted to know, though. And that scared me a little, in a fluttery and tingly kind of way. In a *I have to stop dreaming about things that will never happen*, longing, heartsick kind of way.

The morning was filled with time on the bridge, working with Mister Delveccio, showing him all our training materials so he could continue the work once my crew left.

"I'm going to see if I can get Captain Broussard and Commander Weatherall to allow me to start doing weekly classes on some of this." he told me, smiling widely as he pointed to his tablet. "Our crew has become way too lax."

"I have noticed that." I said, doing my best to keep it light so he wouldn't think I was really down on his crew. "You have some good crewmembers here, they just need the proper guidance."

"Yes," he said. He glanced about the bridge to make sure nobody else was in earshot. "And some weeding." he added.

"Some aren't living up to expectations?" I asked.

"Not *my* expectations, at least." he said. The look on his face told me there was a lot more story there, but I didn't want to pry.

We had finished a good morning of training, and I was seeing a lot of potential in the crew that was on duty at the time. I was just getting ready to head down to lunch, but I had to stop to check something first. I sent Lieutenant Delveccio on, and I took a seat at a console on the bridge.

It only took me a matter of three minutes to find my way

through their system and to locate a duty roster. There were no scheduled times for Captain Broussard. That seemed curious. I knew she hadn't been working days, at least not since we'd gotten there, and didn't seem to work nights or evenings. The duty roster did not show her working at all.

I thought that was quite curious, so I tried to locate the last time she actually was on scheduled duty. Their logs only went back a month, with everything else moved to archive. It took me a few minutes to find my way around their security protocols so I could access the archive, but once I did I found something even more curious. The captain hadn't worked any scheduled time in over a year.

How was that possible? Wouldn't someone from the Freedom have noticed during our previous meetups? Maybe she just didn't schedule herself, maybe she worked but always had someone else also scheduled. Like she was more of an overseer type of manager, and not as hands on. It could be. It was not strictly regulation–or normal–but possible.

Bao met me at the entryway to the cafeteria. She guided me along the passageway, to an out of the way corner where there was little foot traffic.

"I talked to Doctor Freeman," Bao told me. "She was pretty damn reluctant to reveal anything."

"That's it? She didn't tell you anything?" Why did she drag me over here, then?

"Didn't say that, kiddo. I said she was reluctant. She was able to tell me the captain has been having some memory issues for a while, but she wouldn't go into any details. After a lot of prying and asking, I get the feeling the captain is in early stages of dementia. At least when I asked, she hesitated before telling me she couldn't discuss the captain's personal medical information. Everything else I suggested got a quick answer, so I'm guessing there's something to it."

"Wonderful. So now what?"

"Not sure, kiddo. The ship isn't in any immediate danger, though, so I suppose we can wait and discuss it with Captain Nelson."

"Good idea." I said. "But I don't know about the immediate danger thing. From what I've seen and heard of him, I don't like Commander Weatherall's leadership methods."

"As in his complete lack of them?" Bao asked. I nodded. "Damn, this is a mess." She ran her hand through her short hair.

Lunch was another salad. This time it was a bit soggy. And the juice was a bit watered down. I don't know, maybe it was just me. Maybe my mood affected my perception of the quality of the meal.

After lunch it was back to work. At fourteen hundred, Mister Delveccio and I ran a complete disaster drill with the Command crew.

A disaster drill was right . Calling it a disaster would be kind.

The people knew what to do, they just were stumbling over each other trying to do it. Nobody seemed to know where their coworkers were going to be headed, or what they would be doing. It was clear these drills were not usually ran on the Gale, and that bothered me. This was textbook regulation stuff.

Someone was derelict in their duties here.

Maybe more than one someone.

"That was a good effort." I told the crew. "I think you all know you need some work, though. But good try. I think it would be helpful if you would all study what the other stations are doing during a disaster. That might shed some light on what others are doing so you aren't in one another's way so often."

"I'm going to go one better than that," Lieutenant Delveccio told them. "I want you all to start reading up on everyone else's duties, because starting next week I'm going to randomly assign you to a different station and we're going to run the drills again. Probably more than once."

"Yes, good thinking." I said.

"We're going to run these drills until I feel comfortable that we aren't going to die in the case of a fire or loss of air pressure. And we're going to get it right, one way or the other."

The crew all gave him the 'aye aye' and seemed actually happy that someone was stepping up.

"Lieutenant Monroe," Bao's voice came from my tablet. Only highest priority messages would automatically broadcast like that without me clicking on them.

"Yes, I'm here." I replied quickly.

"Your presence is needed in Engineering."

"On my way."

I had no idea what to expect, but I hurried away from the bridge and made my way to the aft of the Gale, hoping someone on my crew hadn't been hurt.

Anna was back there.

Please don't be Anna, I thought.

When I entered Engineering, I found Bao standing beside three security people, with two of my crew–one of which was Anna–standing across from them, blocking a third member of my crew.

"Report." I said, looking at Bao. It felt funny to order that from her, but I was OIC.

"Ensign Switzer was down here chatting up some crewmember. The girl's boyfriend got wind of it and took a swing at him. Next thing I know, Switzer has the guy pinned. He let the guy up and the guy, some ensign, scampered away. Next thing I know, security is here to arrest Switzer on charges that he was sabotaging equipment."

"What?!" That was utterly ridiculous. Colton would never! "Did he?"

"What do you think, kiddo?"

Well fig!

"What's going on here?" I demanded, approaching the security detail.

"Lieutenant," one of the men with Chief insignia said. "Please have your crewmembers back away so we can arrest Ensign Switzer, ma'am."

"Not until I know more, Chief." I said.

"They are impeding the lawful duties of a security officer, Lieutenant–as are you now–and will be charged accordingly if they do not remove themselves from this proximity immediately."

"Yes, I know." I told him. "Give me just a moment and we'll see what we can figure out here."

"Ma'am,"

"That's an order, Chief." I said.

"With all due respect, ma'am, you have no authority to prevent a security detail from–"

"Give me a couple of minutes and if I can't figure out what is going on, I'll hand Ensign Switzer over to you myself. Maybe I can save us all a lot of pain and hassle here, huh?" I said, trying not to

look completely terrified that I had to be the one to stand up to him.

He did not look happy about it, but he nodded and mumbled that I had two minutes. Yay.

I stepped over next to Anna and looked her in the eyes. She was frightened, but also very determined. The other member of my crew who was blocking the security officers from Ensign Switzer was Lieutenant Smith. He didn't look quite as scared, at least. In fact, he looked ready to fight.

"What really happened?" I asked.

"Colton was flirting and the guy didn't like it." Anna explained. "The two got into a physical altercation–"

"Started by that freakin' attic dweller!" Colton shouted.

"And the guy ran off." Anna finished.

"Did Colton touch any equipment?"

"Not a damn thing." Lieutenant Smith answered.

"You all know there probably is security footage down here, right?" I asked. I felt awful for having to ask that, as if I were accusing them–accusing Anna–of lying. "Would that change any of what you just told me?"

"Ensign Switzer didn't have time to touch any equipment, Callie." Anna said. "I was there the whole time. He was being rude, but he didn't touch anything or anybody."

"Okay." I said.

Great. Now what? I couldn't let them drag him off. On the other hand, I thought maybe if they did they'd look at security footage and he'd be released right away.

"Chief," I said, turning to look at him. "Would you accept my word that I will deliver Ensign Switzer to the security offices, where we can all go over the security footage together?"

"I can't do that, ma'am."

"At the very least, I'm going with him. I want to see the footage."

"We don't have any footage for this section, ma'am. It's also standard procedure that we hold him for forty eight hours before discussing the case in detail."

"Wait, what?" I asked, surprised by the stupidity of the idea.

"Whose brilliant idea was that?" Bao asked.

"Commander Weatherall, Commander." he said.

"For what purpose?"

"According to the commander, it allows time for the accused to cool off enough to realize a confession is much more expedient."

"That's insane!" she shouted. "There is no way in hell that you're going to hold Ensign Switzer for–"

"Those are the rules, ma'am." the chief said. His colleagues nodded.

"Colton didn't do anything though!" a young woman with recruit insignia on her uniform shouted.

"Stay out of this, Emma." a guy told her.

"But I didn't!" Ensign Switzer shouted in his own defense.

"Don't matter, you're still going to hang." another guy told him, chuckling.

So that's how it was here? Someone is accused, then mob justice takes over? I was not going to let one of my crew be burned at the stake like someone accused of witchcraft in seventeenth century Salem.

"Unless you can present evidence, you will leave my crewman alone." I told the security chief, making sure that everyone else in Engineering also heard.

"Ma'am," the chief began.

"I don't want to hear it." I told him.

"The regulations–"

"I don't care about the regulations!" I shouted. "I will not stand idly by while you persecute this ensign. I've seen no proof, not even believable testimony… not even *first hand* testimony, that he did anything other than chat with a girl. While I do wish he had not disrupted her while she was on duty–if she was–I will deal with that myself. That is not something you can arrest him for."

"Ma'am, we have to take–"

"If you're going to take him in, you're going to have to drag me in as well." I told them. "Do you want to do that?"

The chief was looking very intently at me, like he was trying to decide if he actually might do that. I really didn't want to go to jail for Colton, but I didn't see how he did anything wrong here, other than show bad judgement.

"She's just a girl." a second security guy, this one an ensign, told the chief.

"She's a lieutenant." the chief said under his breath.

"I'm also the OIC of our mission. We are guests here. You do not treat guests this way."

“If you don’t take him in, we’ll just have to take care of it ourselves.” one of the men in the back said.

“Is this really how you people treat others?” I shouted. “Ya know what, I’m done. I’m sick of this.” I unfolded my tablet and sent a priority message to all my crew that they were to gather their things and return to the Thumper. “If you all want to go on like this, fine. I feel really sorry for the passengers on this ship, though.”

“What are you doing, kiddo?” Bao asked.

“Gather your things, Bao, we’re headed back to the Freedom.” I turned to the security chief. “You will stand down now and allow my crew to return to our shuttle.”

“Negative, Lieutenant.” the chief replied. “I can’t do that, ma’am.”

“You cannot prevent a visiting crew member from returning to their own ship, Chief. Step aside.”

“Ma’am,”

“Now!” I snapped.

He stepped quickly aside and I waved my crew out of Engineering. Anna lagged behind, but I shooed her on. I was the last out, and I stormed toward our quarters, so angry I just wanted to kick someone.

It was less than ten minutes before there was a tapping on our room’s door. I had all my things packed up and Bao was almost finished. We had barely unpacked anything. I grabbed my bag and pushed to open the door.

“Lieutenant,” she began. Captain Broussard.

“Captain,” I said, nodding.

“I heard you were interfering with the duties of one of my security chiefs.”

“That is not entirely accurate, Captain. What happened, from the best I can tell, is that one of your crew made false accusations about one of my crew. When I arrived, your security personnel were attempting to apprehend my ensign.”

“And you stopped them from doing so.” she accused.

“Yes, ma’am, I did.” I agreed.

“Captain,” Bao said, stepping to my side. “Your personnel were being very difficult, ma’am.”

“Commander, it’s so good to see you!” Captain Broussard said. “It’s been so long!”

“Uh…” Bao said, trailing off.

Well that was great. We had a captain with dementia, a first officer who seemed to be running things–badly–and a ship that seemed powerless to deal with either.

"Captain," I said, getting her attention back. "Your security protocol here seems to be to arrest someone on ungrounded accusations, then hold them for a couple of days until they get sick of sitting there and admit to something. At least that is how it sounds. And according to your chief, this was put in place by your first officer."

"That is absurd! I order you to have your crewmember report to security right this minute." Captain Broussard told me.

"Negative, ma'am." I said.

I stepped past her, into the passageway. My crew were all gathered there, ready to head out.

"Are you disobeying a direct order, Lieutenant?" the captain asked me.

"Ma'am, I am not allowing my ensign to be treated like this."

"I can have you arrested as well, Lieutenant."

"Be that as it may, I will not allow it." I gave my crew a wave, ushering them on. "Head to the shuttle." I told them.

"I'm ordering you to stop that, Lieutenant!" Captain Broussard told me.

"I'm sorry, but my first duty is the safety and wellbeing of my crew, Captain." I said.

"Commander Xiang?" she said, turning toward Bao.

"Sorry Captain, my duty is to my OIC."

"Isn't anyone going to listen to me?!" she shouted, looking at my crewmembers as they passed.

"Sorry Captain," Lieutenant Mehmet said. "I support my OIC."

I almost felt sorry for her. There she stood, looking feeble and old, trying to convince others to follow her. Technically I should be following her orders, but as the OIC of an away crew I did have some leeway. By ordering my crew to leave I skirted the rules but didn't break them.

"You have a problem, Captain." I told her. Bao passed between us on her way out. "Your crew is unprofessional, disorganized, and undisciplined. You have a medical problem and should step down, but your first officer, who I can only assume has been running things in your place, seems to be doing little to correct the problems, from my

point of view. It won't be long before something happens and someone dies or there is anarchy onboard."

I felt so bad for her, but I couldn't solve all her problems, and she wouldn't even listen if I could. She was held back by pride, having done this for so many years and having done a great job at one point.

"You're right." she said.

I had begun to walk away from her, and that comment took me off guard. I turned to look at her and the frank, open look on her face made me feel even worse. The tears filling her eyes did not help, either.

"Captain?"

"I do have a problem here." She stared down into my eyes and tried to fight back her tears. "Can you please stay and discuss this with me?" she asked.

"Ma'am?"

"You have a different perspective than most of my crew, Miss Monroe."

"I imagine so."

"I think you could help me come up with a plan."

"A plan for what, Captain?" I asked.

"To fix our problems."

"What about my crew? About Mister Switzer?"

"Forget about that," she said. "I'll let security know I have checked into things and am convinced that this was blown out of proportion, that your ensign is in the clear."

"I don't feel comfortable with my crewmembers continuing the training, ma'am. They would have to be alone with your crew, and your crew made direct threats toward one of mine."

"Stay as our guests. No training. You can stay in a group, if you like. Please, Miss Monroe. You aren't wrong about our problems, I just need another point of view to help solve them."

"Are you sure, ma'am?"

"Yes."

–

Bao and I sat across the table from Captain Broussard and Doctor Freeman. I wanted her there so we could ask questions and get complete and honest answers about Captain Broussard's ability to continue working and in what capacity.

Turns out, not much. Not for a long time now. So the plan had to be how to get things fixed without her. Bao and I threw a lot of ideas at her, and she liked some and not so much the others.

In the end, what she agreed on was that Weatherall could not be allowed to take over as captain. That would be a complete disaster. What I proposed, and what we all eventually agreed on, was that Lieutenant Delveccio would be promoted directly to captain, effective immediately, with Captain Broussard serving as a mentor and advisor to him.

The crew would undergo a cross training program, which Delveccio already seemed to want from what he was saying to me, and there would be a huge emphasis on discipline and professionalism. I agreed to speak to Milton about completing a lot of additional training missions there in the near future.

"So we'll gather the senior staff tomorrow to announce the changes and shore up support?" Lieutenant Delveccio asked.

"Yes, Ted." Captain Broussard replied. "I think you'll make a great captain."

"Well," I said, noticing the time. "I suppose I should go make sure my crew hasn't gotten into any more trouble."

"I can't thank you enough for helping with this." Captain Broussard said. "Please enjoy yourselves tonight. I'll make reservations for your crew at one of the restaurants on the entertainment deck, if you like. My treat."

"That's not necessary, Captain." I told her.

"Are you certain?"

"We really should be going, ma'am."

"I appreciate all you've done, Miss Monroe. You too, Commander Xiang."

"Yes, we all do." Lieutenant Delveccio agreed.

My crew–along with Na-Young Kang and Albert Deon, two civilian passengers travelling back with us–assembled at the Thumper for our departure. We pulled away from the Gale by sixteen hundred, takeout food ready to eat in boxes, compliments Captain Broussard, awaited us once we settled in.

But when the boxes were pulled out everyone got this weird look on their faces. They were all staring at me.

“Callie,” Anna said. Everyone went silent. “We all had a hand in this.”

“Anna organized everything.” Audry said.

“No,” Anna argued. “Well, we all were very impressed with how you stood up for the crew, so–”

“We wanted to find a way to thank you.” Colton Switzer said.

“So we did this.” Anna finished.

Anna lifted the lid on one of the boxes to reveal a cake.

“Happy birthday!” they all shouted.

I didn’t know what to say. I was shocked,obviously. And then they all started singing happy birthday to me. I actually teared up at that point.

For the next hour we ate cake and ice-cream instead of real food. There was actual food in the other boxes, and we broke them out when everyone had had enough sweets. All in all, it was a great crew bonding experience, and we had fun laughing about all that had happened that day.

“Come here for a minute, I need to talk.” Anna told me.

She went down the small passageway, back near the bathroom. I made sure someone was watching the helm–Bao was–then followed.

“Sixteen.” she said.

“Yep.”

“Happy birthday, Callie.” she said, looking very intently into my eyes.

“Thank you.” I said, transfixed, my mouth suddenly dry.

“You’re older now.” she said, her eyes moving down to my mouth, then back up to my eyes repeatedly.

“Uh-huh.” I mumbled.

My heart began to race. I wasn’t sure how long it had been there, but her hand was now holding onto mine, squeezing it lightly. My arm tingled all the way to the shoulder at her touch. And then she raised her other hand, reaching it behind my neck and touching me there, burning my skin at the point of contact as she stared into my eyes with a depth I had never experienced before.

“I think,” she said, her face suddenly about ten centimeters

closer to me. “That’s old enough.”

She moved in, her breath brushing against my face now. Her mouth was slightly parted, and I noticed her tongue flick across her lips, wetting them.

“For what?” I asked.

My stomach flipped over, my legs trembled, and I started to feel slightly light headed. Was I going to faint?

“A lot of things.” she whispered, now mere centimeters away.

I had a strange thought that I should back away, but I couldn’t seem to make myself move. My brain wasn’t working quite right, either. All my thoughts were jumbled, and all I kept thinking is ‘I’m having a panic attack,’ only I wasn’t.

“Such, um…” I said, and had to pause to swallow. “What, exactly?”

“For someone smart and someone with great intuition and attention to detail you can be very dumb about some things, ya know?” she whispered. There was a twinkle in her eyes.

“What kind of things?” I asked.

“For example,” she purred. “This.”

Her lips brushed against mine, sending electric jolts through them and making my heart temporarily fail to beat. She kissed me lightly at first, then more firmly, as her hands encircled me to pull me closer. Her lips moved against mine, and I could feel the heat of her body up against mine.

I couldn’t breathe.

“Happy birthday.” she said again, backing away and leaving a cold absence where her body had recently been.

Leaving me panting.

## Chapter Nine

We decided on four hour shifts, with two people up front at any given time. One would fly the ship, the other would concentrate completely on checking the outer skin of the Gale for damage that needed to be taken care of, as well as check on the parts that required general maintenance. We are only making a list to send to the Gale's crew, so they can create a plan to address the issues.

How it would work, essentially, is that the three engineers–Bao, Anna, and Lieutenant Smith–would take turns watching for damage while someone else did the flying. It wasn't that difficult to fly the shuttle in open space, though my rudimentary skills required close oversight when I was at the helm. Pok and VanWinkle were also both able to steer, though none of us were anywhere near as good as Bao or Mister Smith.

Anna hadn't mentioned what had happened the previous night. At least a couple of the crew saw her kiss me, and all we had gotten so far were raised eyebrows. I expected a little teasing, at the very least. You know how people are.

"You need to get some sleep." Bao told me.

It was her turn to watch the Gale and log areas of concern. We had been checking the outside of the gale for almost seventeen hours at that point, and I thought we had about ten or twelve hours remaining, based on our rate thus far. I hadn't slept yet. Not since early the day before, on the Gale.

"Head to one of the bunks, kiddo. You look dead."

"Gee, you sure know how to win a girl over." I told her, forcing a small laugh.

"Eh, girls, guys, whoever seems interesting at the moment." she responded.

"Um… okay."

I had no idea Bao was bi. Or pan. However she identified herself. I always thought she was just interested in guys, but mostly interested in work and not in any kind of relationship with anyone.

"Anna is back there in one of the rooms. I think she's alone."

"I'm not tired, Bao."

"Kiddo, you are so tired you can barely keep your eyes open. What's really going on? I thought you two finally got somewhere last night?"

"We…" Oh, she saw that. "I'm just not tired, that's all."

"Suit yourself, but I need a competent pilot up here. Scoot."

"Yeah, okay."

I didn't want to, but I took her advice and moved away from the pilot console. Miss Pok took my place, and I headed back to the cabin where Anna was supposedly alone.

"There's my girl." a half asleep Anna said as I entered.

"Bao forced me out." I told her.

"You need sleep, Callie. You look tired."

"Probably. I just need to take my Amblipen and let it kick in first."

"Oh, yes, that's true. Sorry."

"It's okay. I've lived with small spaces my entire life."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Um, uh, we need to, uh, talk… about… something."

"Oh." she said.

Her smile faded and a worried look covered her face. Great. I hated making her feel that way. It's not at all what I would ever ask for.

"What, um, did that… why did you… I mean…" It was so hard for me to figure out what I wanted to ask. "What I mean is how do–"

"Callie, uh, I thought my interest in you was returned. Did I read things wrong, or..."

She didn't even complete the sentence, just kind of left it hanging there. I was scared, but I nodded. Her smile in response was one of the most wonderful things I had ever seen.

"Thank God and the academy!"

"The what?" I asked, laughing.

"It's just a saying my grandma had. I've been kind of interested

in you for a long time. I have been dropping hints *forever*!"

"I just need to know… like, what do we do about this?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Um… like…" Why was this so scary? "I just mean, like, if you were maybe, um, interested in… like, going… further? Like maybe… I don't know, sort of maybe dating, see how this goes, or what?" I felt my face burning in embarrassment.

"I like that idea."

"Okay, so, um, I guess that means… I mean we need to make sure–"

"I'm sure." she said, grabbing onto my hand.

"Make sure it doesn't interfere, like, with our duties. I don't even know… I need to… I guess, like, discuss this with Milton to make sure it's okay, even."

"Why would he care?" she asked. "He doesn't like me?"

"He likes you a lot. But… and then there's your parents. I mean your dad especially, he's like–"

"Militantly anti-gay?" she asked. "Funny how that wasn't the case until I came out to them a few months ago."

"And then… he… oh! So that's what triggered that?"

"Yeah." She admitted. "I'm sorry, Callie, but I think my dad doesn't like you very much right now. I think he suspects how I feel about you."

"Oh. Well that explains some things."

"Sorry."

"That's okay."

So we were going to do this? Actually going to date? I was going to date a member of the crew. I was truly going to date a member of the crew. And someone in my own division, to top it all off. Yes. True. It was true. I needed to just own it, no matter what. To live it.

Whatever consequences may come.

I wanted to kiss Anna again, right then and there, but I couldn't. I was scared. So instead, I told her to have a nice nap, and I went back out to check on my crew.

Bored to tears would be an accurate description of their state. Sitting in a small craft while it circles a larger craft, with no duty other than to sit on your rear while others work can do that to you.

A beep indicated there was a voice message on my tablet. I

unfolded it and activated the voice channel.

"Lieutenant Monroe." I responded. I had already seen on the screen that it was Milton.

"This is Captain Nelson," he said. "Would you have a moment to talk, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, um, just a moment, Milton."

I opened the hatch and crawled down the ladder, to the bay underneath. There were two of my crew down there, playing some kind of card game.

"Would you guys mind leaving for a few minutes? I need some privacy."

"Yes, ma'am." Lieutenant Mehmet answered.

"Thanks. I'll let you know when I'm done, so you can continue your game."

I waited as they climbed from the bay and up into the crew area. Why had they thought to bring the cards along in the first place? Maybe they knew it was going to be a long and boring trip?

"I'm here, Milton."

"I had an interesting conversation a few moments ago with Captain Broussard. It was very enlightening."

"I imagine so." I said, afraid that he'd tell me I was out of line in how I acted.

"Effective tomorrow, she will be stepping down as captain and Mister Delveccio will assume command. I'm told you played a major part in that. Would you like to expand on that?"

I explained everything that went on the day before, and how crazy it all went. He said 'I see' a lot, but let me ramble on. I did *not* include the part where Anna kissed me.

"Commander Xiang was very impressed with the way you stood up for the crew. She said you faced down Captain Broussard, despite the personal consequences it may have had."

"That was nice of her to say, but I only did what was necessary."

"You were walking a fine line there, Lieutenant. You probably went afoul of the regulations regarding insubordination."

"I'm sorry, I just… I had to do what was right. I couldn't let the crew I was responsible for be mistreated, no matter what."

“I think you did the right thing, Lieutenant.” he said. I could hear the amusement in his voice. “Gutsy, but the right thing.”

“Thanks.”

There was an odd prolonged silence. I was pretty sure there was more he wanted to talk about, but he seemed to be taking his time to say it. Which was very unusual for him. I almost asked if we were done, but he eventually spoke.

“There is something else I need to discuss with you.” he said.

“Yes?”

“Commander Xiang spoke about something else.”

“And, uh, what–”

“I guess the crew had a surprise birthday party for you?”

“Um,” I squeaked. Here it is. He’s going to tell me I can’t date Anna. “Yeah.”

“That was awfully nice of them, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, Milton, it was.” I said. I could feel tears welling. It wasn’t fair that I couldn’t be with Anna.

“I feel like such a heel, Callie.”

“Milton,” I said, prepared to plead my case.

“I haven’t missed one of your birthdays since you were five.” he said. “I am so sorry. I can’t believe I let that slip my mind.”

“Um,”

“It was even on my calendar!” he said, clearly upset with himself. “I got busy studying some scans with Chester, and it totally slipped my mind. I am so sorry, Callie. I should have called, at the very least. I will treat you to a special dinner when you get back. It won’t make up for it, but at least I can do that much.”

“Oh,” I said, blowing out my held breath. Phew! “That’s alright, Milton. I was busy too.”

“Kissing Anna, no doubt.” he said, laughing.

Oh.

So he did hear about that. Wonderful. Now the other shoe would drop, now he would tell me I had to stay away from her. That Sally was not happy about it. That it was a conflict of interest because Anna would be serving under me in my division.

“The least I can do is treat you two to a nice dinner to make up for forgetting your birthday. Anywhere you want, it’s on me.”

“Thanks.” was all I could say.

“You’re very welcome.” he said. “Now, how is the inspection of

the Gale coming along?"

We spent ten minutes going over the process we were following, the problems we've found so far, and my lack of piloting skills. When we were all done, he wished me a belated happy birthday and told me he'd see me in a few days. As he was signing off, the shuttle shuddered slightly.

The talk about scans, as well as the shudder, got me thinking about those from Ensign Cho several days before, and as I ascended into the crew area, letting Lieutenant Mehmet and Dr. Gershawn know they could return to their game, I pulled up the scans. I ran quick calculations in my mind, and was just coming to the conclusion that we should soon be meeting the leading edge of…

"Captain, we need you!" Ensign Pok shouted in my direction. It took a moment to realize she was talking to me.

"It's just Lieutenant, Ensign." I told her, heading toward her. "What do you need?"

But I already knew what she needed. We were, as I had concluded myself, meeting the edge of the dust storm that was blowing through space. Not terribly worrisome, we were armored well enough to handle dust and small meteoroids, but somewhere my mind had made the final conclusion on that blank space in the middle where there was nothing.

The nothing was almost definitely *something*.

"Place us behind the Gale." I told her.

The Thumper started shaking about, moved by waves of matter through space. We buffeted, and Pok headed us toward the back of the Gale. Not fast enough, though.

"Bao, take the helm!" I shouted. "Get us out of this!"

She complied, and Pok relinquished control to her. Our little craft was tossed and buffeted much worse than it should have been. This little dust storm was turning into something quite unique.

"We're picking up something on scans." Bao said. "I'm not even sure what that is!" she exclaimed. "Great Goddess Aphrodite, it's big, whatever it is."

Just then our shuttle lunged toward the Gale. Hard. Bao tried to get it under control, but we banged off the surface of the Gale. It must not have been a very hard hit, we were still alive, but it was scary and sent much of my crew tumbling.

"Not good." Bao said. "Dammit!"

I looked out the port and saw chunks passing us. Not dust, though plenty of that was passing us too. Also not larger meteoroids, even though there were some of those. The chunks I saw, the ones receiving the bulk of my attention, were from the Gale.

"My God," Pok whispered, seeing the same thing I was seeing.

"Everyone grab something and hold on!" I shouted. "Bao, try your best to avoid those."

"Doing my best, kiddo." she replied. "This is bad."

Bad was an understatement.

Anna finally made it to the front, and she took hold of my hand. There wasn't a lot we could do, we stood by and watched as Bao tried to get us to a safer location.

Not much to do except watch the bodies floating away from the Gale, some still moving their arms and legs as they hurled through space. It was one of the most sickening moments in my entire life, second only to seeing my parents die in a similar way.

I'll be joining you soon, Mom and Dad, I thought.

Then came the panicked calls over the radio from the crew of the Gale. They were screaming out for help, for some idea what to do. And there was nothing we could do to help them.

We maneuvered to a position behind the Gale… or what remained of it. Pieces were still breaking off of the ship, and there were bright explosions of light as fires flared up as pressurized fuel tanks vented into space.

And then Bao rotated the Thumper. In the distance we could see Freedom. It was difficult through the rocks and dust and debris and bodies, but we could see it.

And we could see that it too was being pelted. Oh my great deity, it was being hit too.

All we could do was watch. And cry. A lot of crying.

So many people dead.

And it was all my fault for not realizing just what I was looking at in those scans earlier. I had cost all those people their lives.

Do you know how awful it is to watch as someone dies because of something you could have prevented?

Do you know how much more awful it is to watch thousands die?

I was doing everything I could to stay alert and aware, because all I wanted to do was curl into a ball and sob. No, I wanted to curl into a ball and die.

But I couldn't. My crew needed everything I could give at that moment. I needed to do everything possible to help save as many lives as possible.

When it had passed, Bao turned to me. She didn't say anything, just looked at me expectantly, her eyes red from crying.

"Continue to try to contact any survivors on the Gale." I mumbled.

"We have to get back to the Freedom!" Audry called out.

"Our families." Chief Vanwinkle added.

"No," I said.

"My parents." Anna said softly to me. "I need to know if they're alright."

"I… I don't know." I said, shaking my head. "Keep trying to get in contact with them." I told her.

"Make the call, ma'am." Bao said.

"We need to do a quick pass over the remains, um, of the Gale." I told her. "In case there are pockets of survivors."

"No!" Ensign Pok shouted.

"We have a duty, Ensign." I told her. "There are… *were* ten thousand people on that ship. Some may still be alive."

"But–"

"Shut it, Pok!" Bao demanded. "I don't believe the Lieutenant

asked for your input."

As Bao flew us around the outside of the Gale, dodging debris and bodies, I worked to contact the Freedom. There were no responses to attempts at voice communications, or answers to any messages. I could detect that there was still some activity going on, electrical-wise, but I couldn't tell what was still working and what wasn't. I couldn't even tell if life support was still going or not.

"There's no chance of finding life here, Lieutenant." Bao informed me, her voice somber.

"Okay Commander," I said. "Head us toward the Freedom."

The closer we got to Freedom, the more damage we could see. The bottom of the ship was facing us, the Freedom having turned on its side during the bombardment somehow. It was pitted with deep scars, holes poking into it at least two decks deep. As we got nearer, we could see the entire aft quarter of the ship was also missing.

"Thumper, come in." I heard in a staticky tone. My tablet had picked up a voice signal on a rarely used short range channel. "Gale, are you there?" it said.

"This is Lieutenant Monroe on the Thumper." I said.

"Miss Monroe? Oh thank God! This is Kre, ma'am. The captain would like to know your condition."

"We're a little beat up, but we're okay. The Gale is, uh, not."

"How bad is it, ma'am?" she asked.

"It's… it's… I do not think–"

"It's a total loss, Kre." Bao interjected. "Are things stabilized on Freedom?"

"All… of them?" she asked, her voice cracking. "I don't know all the details here, ma'am." I could hear her crying as she spoke. "I think we're sealed for now, but last I heard we were springing new leaks all over. The bottom decks are locked off, as is Engineering. I'm sorry ma'am, I think a lot of your department were there at the time."

"Well Hell!" Bao shouted. "Dammit! Have you heard from Logan or Abner? What about Grace?"

"I haven't heard." Kre said.

"Dammit." Bao mumbled again, tears rolling down her face.

"We're on our way back, Kre." I said. "Please tell the captain we'll be there in about…" I looked at Bao and she held up both hands. "Ten minutes."

"Where will you dock, ma'am?" she asked. "The shuttle bays are in the areas shut off."

“The shuttle bays are gone?” Pok asked softly.

“Um,”

“There’s a maintenance hatch on the top of the hull.” Bao told me. “Just opposite the officer’s conference room.”

“Did you hear that, Kre?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Should I have someone waiting there for you?”

“I think you have more important things to do right now, like keeping that ship flying straight.”

“No ma’am, we have no attitude control, no navigation controls at all right now.”

“We’ll be there in ten, Ensign.”

“Better make it fifteen.” Bao told her.

The closer we got, the worse things looked. We could see a lot of electrical sparking through the ports we passed, and there were still gasses venting into space at odd angles, causing the ship to spiral slightly as it coasted along through space.

“We’re all dead.” Audry said.

She had moved up next to me, just behind the helm console. She was shaking, and I saw Lieutenant Smith wrapping an arm around her shoulders, trying to calm her. I glanced around to see all of my crew were on the verge of some kind of breakdown.

“It’s horrible,” I told them. “And a lot of people have died. And everyone else there might die if we don’t do our best to keep it together. There are a lot of people still there who need our help.”

Anna hugged me, and she let out a slight sob as she squeezed. But she let me go and nodded as she pulled away, then wiped at her eyes.

Bao expertly latched us down and hurried down the ladder to open the hatch for us. We didn’t go through the gravity inversion this time, we were entering the top part of the Freedom. It did mean climbing down an additional ladder, though.

At the bottom of the ladder was Kre, waiting there with a tear stained face. She handed me a slimdrive.

“Captain Nelson said to make sure you see this if anything happens to him.” she told me. The lights flickered and dimmed before

coming back to full strength.

"What happened to Milton?!" I asked.

"Nothing yet, ma'am." she said. "He just wanted to be sure. He said you can figure out the password, you're good at things like that."

"Oh. Okay. Where is Milton now?"

"He's checking with the department heads in person."

"Got it. Why don't you head back to the bridge in case there is something we need you there for."

"Yes, ma'am."

I let everyone who had been on the Thumper head off, including our two guests. They had nowhere to go, and were both nearly catatonic after their friends and families on the Gale had been wiped out. Audry offered to take them back to Medical with her.

My first thought was that I should go back to Engineering to see how things were going, but I remembered that Engineering was gone. I still headed back that way, knowing Bao would be there. Anna came along, grabbing onto my hand and holding it tightly.

I saw Sally in the passage. She was just heading into an office, and was still twenty meters down the passage, but she paused and looked at us. I would have thought she would have hurried down and hugged Anna, or told her she was so happy she made it back safe, *something*. But her gaze locked on our joined hands. Her eyes narrowed before turning up to me as a scowl crossed her face. Then she disappeared into the office. I didn't think Anna even noticed her. I hoped she didn't, anyway.

We continued on for a while, Anna commenting now and then about damages that we'd need to address soon when she saw them. She was in some kind of zone where she was noticing all the important things that would need done immediately, and would dismiss the things that weren't as important.

"Callie, I need to check on my parents." Anna told me after a while.

"Of course. I still need to talk to Bao and see what I can do to help out around the ship."

"Try to stay safe." she told me. She hugged me, then gave me a quick peck on the mouth. "I'll find you later."

I caught up with Bao in the passage, maybe forty meters from where the entry to the main Engineering area had been. There was a

hatch across the passage now, an emergency seal, keeping that part of the ship separated so the rest of the ship would not depressurize.

"It's all gone." Bao said, in a strangely cold tone. "Security won't even let me past here, they say it isn't safe."

"I'm sorry. But we need to think about what to do now."

"Not much," she told me. "The whole damn ship is doomed now, kiddo."

"That isn't the answer, Commander!" I shouted at her.

"It's the only answer I have."

"Stop talking like that." I told her.

"Why?" she said, her shoulders slumped. "We're all dead now, anyway?"

"You will not talk like that around the crew and passengers, Commander." I ordered. "Which means not in the passage, got it?"

"We're back on Freedom now, kiddo. You're no longer my boss."

"Bao!" I said, grabbing her by both arms and shaking her. "I don't give a smelly poo where we are, you are not going to panic my crew or I will personally…"

Personally what? I couldn't throw her in the brig because we might need her. Plus, she was technically correct, I was not her superior officer. Also, if we were all going to die anyway then what did it matter if it was in the brig or elsewhere.

"I get your point, kiddo." she said, nodding.

"Now, focus." I said. "What do we need to do to give ourselves the best chance of surviving this."

"Well,"

She peered up at the ceiling, nodding her head along as she began to speak. And just as she did, the lights flickered again.

"I need to check on the emergency generators stationed throughout the ship." she told me. "And I'll need to come up with a list of the minimum equipment that needs to be on, because these generators aren't keeping up, and the batteries will only last a short time."

"Which reminds me, I need to check on the network and systems that run everything." I said, nodding.

"But first, I'm going to run around and collect some of my remaining crew and see if we can get a handle on environmental. It is completely shot, I know that much. I can already smell a stuffiness in

the air, and there is probably God knows what kind of chemicals floating through our air from all the damage and burned equipment."

"Sounds good." I told her, nodding again. "You okay now?"

"Yes," she said, sighing loudly. She gave me a quick hug. "Thanks for bringing me back to the job, kiddo."

We went our separate ways, and I made my way back toward the bridge.

I didn't make it that far, though. Outside the stairway on deck six there was a commotion. It sidetracked me from my goal. I stepped out into the crowd and heard Marshawn Lincoln speaking very loudly.

"The end times have come!" Mister Lincoln shouted out, sounding almost happy about it. "We must all make our peace! God has brought his wrath upon this ship and our people for our sins, and we must repent while we still have time."

"Amen to that." a couple of people shouted.

"To be accepted into the presence of our heavenly father we must not only repent, but we must *cast out* those who refuse to turn away from their sinful lives."

"Amen!" half the crowd shouted at that.

"We must ask for forgiveness, and then we must be happy to meet our father. We must welcome the end, because only with the end can the new beginning come. Our new beginning with the father."

"Amen!" people shouted.

"I implore you to seek out others, to convince them to join us in asking for our salvation, for it is only with one another that we can truly pass on into our eternal freedom. Seek out those who do not yet know the love of our God, and teach them by word or by force, the way of our eternal father."

The man was skating toward some very dangerous talk. He was very nearly inciting violence. As much as his religious views were protected, and should be, I also thought he should be locked up if he stepped into calling directly for violence during an emergency event like this. We didn't need to turn against each other when we all must work together if we were going to survive.

I shook his words off and continued on my way to the bridge. Once there, I took my seat at my console and began working over a list of what was and wasn't working in the ship systems.

Not a lot was working well.

Not a lot was working *at all*.

Obviously, all the sensors for the thrusters–every thruster–was down. Every single bit of data from the engineering section was completely gone, as was anything that relied on that data in the least. Our network throughout the ship was down. Even the emergency backups for all the networking equipment were down.

But our navigation scanners were working, which meant we could still scan space around us and look to see where we were going.

Which was kind of ironic, considering we had no way to dodge anything if there was something heading our way, and no way to steer near anything that may actually have useful ores or minerals.

Not that we actually had anything left that could mine those ores or minerals, if we did identify anything.

Thinking of the scans brought me back to one very powerful thought: I should have known this was coming. It was there in all the scans. I stared at those for so long, and I should have known that nothing cannot be nothing in the midst of all the rest of the meteoroids and debris. There simply had to be something there.

As much as I tried to tell myself that I wasn't the only one who missed it, I also knew that didn't clear me. And, to be honest, I was usually the one who was considered the detail person. I should always catch everything like that. Failure comes at too high of a price.

Like ten thousand lives from the Gale and unknown numbers already from the Freedom.

"Ma'am," I heard Kre say. I glanced up at her. "The intercom, ma'am."

I had been zoning out and hadn't heard. Actually, I had been wallowing in self loathing and blame. If Kre hadn't said anything, I would never have noticed that there was a voice coming out of the shipwide intercom.

"...officer's conference room." the voice, some girl I did not recognize, said.

"Did you catch that, Ensign Kre?" I asked her.

"She said the captain is asking all senior officers, and you ma'am, to come to a meeting in the officer's conference room."

"Thank you, Ensign."

"Lieutenant," Ensign Alonso said. "Ma'am, could I be relieved long enough to go check on my family? I haven't been able to contact them since this happened."

"Of course." I told him. "As long as one of you remains on the bridge in case we get something up and running, I see no reason for the other two not to go if they want. I'll let the three of you work out who goes and who stays."

I hurried to the conference room, almost knocking Bao over when we met in the passage right outside the door. We stepped inside and found Milton and Sally already seated, and Liam beginning to sit.

"Dr. Burton will not be attending." Milton told us. "He's in the middle of a surgery at this time, but will be available by comm if we need anything from him, so let's get started."

"Chester?" I asked.

"Have a seat." Milton told me.

Was Chester injured? It was important that the passengers and crew knew that they had a full crew working hard to save them. It wasn't the time to have one member out, if he could possibly serve. How long could he possibly be down?

"The Gale was destroyed?" Milton asked me.

"Yes. We, um, didn't find any signs of survivors."

"Or any remains of the ship that looked likely to be housing any possible survivors who were not able to contact us." Bao added.

"It's amazing the shuttle was able to survive the ordeal." Liam said. He nodded to Bao. "I'm assuming that was due to your excellent piloting skills and leadership."

"I was the pilot," Bao said. "But–"

"She did an amazing job of getting us out of there." I told them. "Probably the only one who could have."

"But the Lieutenant took charge and got us all through it. I would have panicked if it weren't for her leadership."

Milton gave me a long, hard look, then turned to Sally and nodded. She didn't look very happy about it, for some reason. Not that any of us had reason to be happy that day.

"Miss Monroe," Sally began, waiting for me to make eye

contact before continuing. “The captain and I had a short discussion earlier. In the middle of an emergency situation, such as this, the captain has the authority to bypass normal procedures for promotions, as the need arises. Under such circumstances, the crewmember would usually be elevated with the provision that as soon as reasonably possible, the normal procedures would be followed. Do you understand, Lieutenant?”

“Um, yes, ma’am?” I said, glancing sideways at Milton.

“Despite that provision in the standing regulations, Captain Nelson has informed me that he would at least like to have the senior staff’s approval.”

She looked very unsettled by what she was telling me. She was nearly in tears. I had a sinking feeling starting to grow in my stomach, but I did not want to start down that road yet.

“The, uh, captain,” Sally said, looking down at her tablet. “Has nominated you for elevation to commander, to be placed immediately in the position of first officer. Do you have any response to that?”

*That* was what I feared she would say. Chester wasn’t injured or being operated on, Chester was dead.

“Callie,” Milton said, breaking my daze. “Commander Rowe has not been heard from since before we sustained the damage.”

“Chester?” I said, still not believing it. “But Chester–”

“His last known location was in the aft section of deck two.” Sally told me and Bao. “He was checking with the head of one of the departments there on some new production ideas they had discussed last month.”

“Well… so he could still be alive?” I asked. “I mean you don’t *know* that he’s–”

“It’s unlikely.” she said. “Even if he were to survive the initial onslaught and make it to a safe room, that entire section lost atmosphere almost immediately.”

“And that’s *if* he wasn’t near the section that was broken off the ship.” Bao added. She slammed her fist down. “Damn! Chet… Oh damn.”

“He didn’t deserve this.” Liam said. “None of them did.”

Chester Rowe was a magnificent person. If he was dead, we had lost one of the best people we had to help get us out of this mess. I didn’t even know what we do to make up for that. There was really no way we could.

"Ahem," Sally said. "All in favor of the previously mentioned elevation of Lieutenant Monroe please signify by voice vote."

"Wait… I…" I took a deep breath. "Shouldn't Bao be, um, considered? I mean in this situation it would make much more sense, we face a large number of engineering challenges and she knows that better than anyone else. Plus, she's a wonderful leader, and–"

"I vote for Lieutenant Monroe." Bao said over me.

"Aye." Liam agreed quickly, surprising me.

"Yes from me." I heard Mark say over a com.

"Yes." Milton agreed.

Sally didn't immediately agree. Instead she looked at me, giving me a death stare. It was quite frightening, actually. I fought my desire to shrink back into my seat while she looked over me.

"Affirmative." she said quietly. "And by a unanimous vote Miss Calliope Monroe is elevated to commander and give the first officer role."

"Congratulations, kiddo." Bao said, reaching across to pat my shoulder.

"Congratulations." Milton agreed somberly, nodding as he did so. "I'm going to be relying on you heavily over the next few weeks."

With that, we got down to the business of trying to make the ship last as long as possible.

"Commander Xiang, can you get me any capability to steer this ship at all?" Milton asked.

"Well," she said, sighing loudly. "I was reviewing that possibility just before this meeting. Right now we have random venting occurring, which is pushing us way off course. If we can get those under control, I can start to refit the existing thrusters with new actuators so that we may be able to manually control them. It won't be pretty, but we may be able to do it. Granted, we don't have a lot of fuel left on board from what I can tell, but it should be sufficient for a short time."

"Where are the majority of the breaches that are venting?" I asked.

"Most are through the lower hull breaches. There are dozens along seams and ports and things all along the ship, but if we can get a handle on the lower decks it would be a start. That and the back section near Engineering. It may be sealed off, but even past the sections that are sealed, there are many leaks and breaches."

"Can we just shut down the lower decks?" I asked.

"We're getting a lot of leaks all through the lower five decks. Some even up into deck six."

"We can't shut them all down." Sally said. "Our farms, our manufacturing centers, they're all down there."

"Farms won't do us any good if we don't save this ship." Liam said.

"We're not saving the ship." Milton said.

We all got really still and quiet.

Of course we weren't going to save the ship. It was far beyond being saved. All we were doing was buying time. To what end, I wasn't sure. Just to fight for every ounce of life we could, maybe. Maybe to try to prepare some sort of signal back toward Earth. Maybe to pray for a miracle?

"Commander Monroe, do you have the slimdrive I left for you?" Milton asked.

"I have it." I said. It felt weird being called Commander, even if it was only going to last long enough to get messages out to Earth.

I pulled the slimdrive from my pocket and handed it over to Milton, and he plugged it into the console that was connected to the large screen on the bulkhead.

"This is a list of the approximate timeline of our last contacts with each of the other ships and with Earth." he said.

The screen showed each of the other six ships and Earth in one column, the last contact date in the next, and the presumed status in the third.

According to the chart, the UNSC Dragon and their transport ship, the UNSC Tsunami collided with each other shortly after setting out and were both verified as destroyed. Telescopes from Earth saw the Vitol being smashed by an asteroid, and their sister ship the Bear was never heard from again. The Peregrino and her transport, the salvador, both sent mayday signals to Earth less than twenty years into their flight, and then were never heard from or seen again.

The most surprising part was that our last contact with Earth wasn't about a hundred years ago, and we didn't lose contact because of signal degradation. At least not completely. The last contact,

according to the chart, was almost two hundred years ago, and by then the population of Earth was estimated at less than fifty thousand. There were incredibly violents storms, sections were so hot and wet as to be uninhabitable, and some sections were frozen over. Pollution in the air was so bad that they couldn't even breathe. And the last contact was during a horrible series of quakes that was lasting for days, and were registering over ten on the Richter scale with expectations that they would get stronger and stronger. People were dying everywhere.

"Earth is gone." Milton said. "Completely uninhabitable. Everyone there is dead."

"And all the other ships." Sally added. She choked back tears. "We're it?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. I didn't know whether to be angry or sad.

"I intended to, when the time was right. Captain Donaldson told me, and his captain told him. It was thought if the crew knew we were all that remained they could get dispirited. Lose drive. Every captain has sworn his successor to silence."

"So we're the last of the human race?" Bao asked. "Well balls, that sucks."

"So, Captain," Liam said, then paused before continuing. "If you are so certain that we cannot save this ship, what is our next move? Why bother to try anything, for that matter?"

Milton took a moment to look around to each of us, looking into each of our eyes. He seemed sad, angry, and determined all at once. And controlled.

"Ladies," Milton said. "Gentlemen, while it is undoubtedly true that the majority of humanity will not survive this, it is my hope that we may give people time with their loved ones." He reached over to me and squeezed my arm. "I also hold out hope that a small number may find a suitable location to relocate, and we have to make preparations for that."

Everyone looked around at each other for a while before turning back to Milton. They all looked confused. How would people survive without the ship? How would they find a location to live, even if they did?

But I thought I knew.

"Bao, do you think you can turn us about…" I closed my eyes and did some quick calculations. "Maybe sixty degrees or so to port, and maybe twenty degrees down?"

"It's, uh, possible." she said, shaking her head. "What are you up to, kiddo?"

"And do you think the Thumper could be used as a lander?" I asked.

"Just what the hell are you getting at, Lieutenant?" Liam asked.

"Commander." Milton corrected. "And I know *exactly* what she is getting at. It's just the kind of thing I was hoping we'd come up with." He reached out and patted my arm. "Nice thinking, Callie."

"Can it be done, Bao?" I asked.

"I don't know yet, Commander." she told me.

"This is nuts." Liam said, shaking his head. "Okay, so if it can be done, we're going to need a list of equipment needed for the twenty or thirty people to survive with."

"The Thumper isn't going to hold that many." Bao told him. "It was originally designed with seats for twelve, and that includes the flight crew."

"Can't we squeeze more people in?" Sally asked. "Isn't there a lot of space in the cargo hold?"

"We'll need that space for equipment." Liam told her.

"And food." Mark said, over the comm. "And while I know you could possibly squeeze more in, I'd recommend sticking to that original twelve."

"Yes, we should." Bao agreed. "It'll be difficult enough fitting provisions for everyone in there, even with the hold below, and we have to worry about weight as well. Commander Tyler, I may need help from your division if I'm going to retrofit the shuttle for use as a lander. Your crew has suits for outside still?"

"Well yes, but–"

"Good. It's going to be delicate enough as it is." she told him.

"What will you need, Bao?" Milton asked.

"I'm going to have to go into the Thumper and detach from the ship, then find a way to attach to the ship that will leave the bottom available for repairs. Plus, I'm going to have to come up with some kind of material that will work as an ablative shield on the bottom. It's pretty well fortified as it is, thank the holy maker, but we need more." she turned my way. "Thumper was originally design to land workers, but two hundred years ago someone decided to remove half the shielding. I don't think it would hold up during entry to a thick atmosphere unless I do something to beef it up."

"Are we really doing this?" Sally asked.

“I think it’s our best shot.” Bao told her.

“Yes, I think so.” Milton agreed, nodding.

“Then the group will need time to prepare.” Sally said. “So who is going?”

That silenced us all. Who was going? Who got to live? How would we even select something like that? To decide who has the best chance to live and create a new home for the human race to thrive.

Who would get to be the last twelve humans?

“Milton, who are you going to need with you?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Oh, not me.” he said, actually managing a laugh. “I’m, sadly, a little too old. And haven’t you ever heard that the captain must go down with the ship?”

“But Mil–”

“I think you’ll be heading this expedition, Commander Monroe.”

“No no, I’m not… I mean… if you’re looking for someone younger than you, you should choose Bao, or even Sally. They both would be excellent choices, and–”

“I respectfully decline, Miss Monroe.” Sally said. “I’m going to be fifty soon, which is much too old for what is needed.”

“No it’s not. Plus… well then Bao–”

“You know you’re better suited for this than I, kiddo.” Bao said.

“But Commander Xiang would be an excellent choice to go along as well.” Milton said. “I take it she would be high on your list of crew you’d like to take along?”

“But… but…” I looked up at Liam, knowing *he’d* support my position on this.

“You are the logical choice, Commander.” Liam told me.

“But… but…” I tried to come up with a good argument, but I couldn’t. I just had to admit everything. “I’m the one to blame for all of this!” I said.

“What kind of nonsense is this?” Milton asked.

“I should have… seen what was coming! The scans! Milton, the–”

“Callie, you couldn’t have known.” he said, trying to comfort me. “If anyone is to blame it is me. I should have taken Cho’s concerns more seriously. And yours.”

“But…”

“Nobody is to blame, Callie.” Bao said. “Hell, I should have

had the ship better prepared for this. I could have at least seen that this was a possibility and had the shuttles better protected, just in case."

"You can't blame yourself, dear." Mark said over the com.

"My department should have developed better sensors, so we would know what was coming." Liam added.

"And you *are* the right one to lead this mission, Commander." Milton said. "No more arguments."

Well that sucked. Okay then, I thought, I better start thinking about how this is all going to go, since it seems I wasn't being given a choice. What would we need to survive? If I was being stuck with this, I was going to do it the right way.

"I'll need a list of what each of you think is absolutely necessary for us to survive. And a list of people you think should go."

## Chapter Ten

When the meeting was over, I pulled up my tablet and started running through my own list of who I thought should go. It was hard to think about. The only people I was able to come up with right away were Bao and Anna. Bao for her leadership and engineering abilities, Anna… well, because I didn't think I could stand it if she didn't survive. The thought of a universe without her was unthinkable.

I went to the bridge and began looking at systems again. The Freedom had to survive long enough to get a landing crew near that moon or else this was all a wasted experiment. It may be anyway, I knew, but that was our only chance.

"Are you okay, Lieutenant?" Ensign Kre asked me. I blinked hard at her a few times.

"Shouldn't you be off by now, Ensign?" I asked.

"Yes, but nobody showed up at the end of shift, and I really have nowhere to go, ma'am." she said. "If I may say so, ma'am, you look like you could use some sleep."

Oh Kre. She was twenty five, I think her personnel record said. She shouldn't die yet, she was still young. It was so unfair.

"Your quarters weren't in the shared areas, were they?" I asked her.

"No ma'am, I lived with my parents on deck seven. We're back in the aft section. I was on duty when the event occurred, but…" At that point her resolve faded and her face crumpled up. "Mom and Dad were both home. I was living with them, so I have nowhere to go now."

"I'm so sorry, Ensign." I told her.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm okay."

She burst into full racking sobs. Her body was shaking, and she pulled her hands up to cover her face.

Ensigns Alonso and Teague were not present, leaving me and Ensign Kre alone. She was going through a complete emotional breakdown, and nobody else was there to comfort her. I wasn't her favorite person, and I had no delusions about that, but I also wasn't going to just let her sob without doing something for her.

I stood from my seat and made my way to her side, leaning down beside her to give her a hug. It felt weird, but I had to do something to comfort her if I could, and I didn't know what else to do. I grabbed onto her water bottle and held it up to her, then found some tissue.

"If you don't want to be here, Ashley, just go. It's okay."
"I have a job to do, Lieutenant." she said, stiffening.
"I am here, I can take care of things."
"I wouldn't even know where to go, m'ama."
"Friends or family?" I asked. She shook her head. "All of them were… are gone now?"
"Yes, ma'am." she said.

I never considered that part. Everyone who went on Thumper was going to leave a lot of people behind. Maybe I needed to choose a crew with no close family left.

But that would rule out Anna.

So maybe I needed to choose people at least with the idea that they would have trouble adjusting because they would be missing their family and friends. Of course we'd all be scared and missing people.

"Commander, can I please speak with you?" Milton asked. He was standing at the doorway to the bridge. "When you have a moment."
"Yes, sir." I said.
"How are you holding up, Ensign?" he asked.
"Okay, sir." she said, nodding and not fooling anyone.
"You hang in there." he told her. "Why don't you wait until someone else is back on the bridge, Commander. I don't think any of us need to be alone at a moment like this."

He disappeared into the ready room and I looked back at Kre. She was wiping at her eyes again, but suddenly stopped and looked at me.

"Did he say commander, ma'am?" she asked.

"Yes. Sadly, I've gotten a promotion."

"Sadly? That's great… oh." Her face turned down in recognition of just how I got the promotion. "Oh my, that's… I'm sorry, ma'am. Commander Rowe?"

"They are pretty sure he's among those we've lost." I told her.

"I'm sorry you got your promotion that way, Commander. But congratulations, even with the circumstances being less than ideal."

"Thank you, Ensign."

It was only a few minutes before Ensign Teague was back on the bridge. He was as pale as a ghost, and had obviously been crying a lot.

"How are you doing, Maury?" I asked him.

"Not good." he said, nodding and giving a forced smile. "Are you okay, ma'am?" he asked.

"This is a lot to take in." I admitted to him. He had no idea just *how much* it was. "I'm doing my best."

"It's terrible." he said, shivering. "So many…" He shook his head and looked over at me. "No offense, ma'am, but you're just a kid."

"Maury," Ensign Kre began.

"What I mean is, you are dealing with this incredibly well, but you're just a kid. You should be huddled in a corner hugging a teddy bear, not on duty."

"I appreciate your concern, Maury, but I'm doing okay. I think my times of being *off duty* are pretty much over with for the foreseeable future."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Besides," I said, trying to smile. "I haven't had a teddy bear since I was seven."

"No doubt it was replaced with a copy of the regulations." Kre said. We all managed to laugh a little at that, despite the situation we were in.

"Are you two going to be okay alone up here?" I asked. "The captain needs me."

"Yes, ma'am." they said in unison.

I headed toward the ready room. I had my doubts about leaving them alone, but I didn't see much choice. Plus, at that point it didn't make any difference if someone was on the bridge or not, so they may as well sit up there if they wanted to. I certainly did not

want to order them to leave.

"This is so awful, Milton." I said. I sat beside him.

"You're going to be fine, Callie." he told me. For some reason, it always bothered me when he called me by name when I was on duty. He usually called me Miss Monroe, or Lieutenant. Commander now, I guess.

"Does it bother you when I call you by name?" I asked him.

"I think I have bigger things to worry about." he said, smiling. "There are times when I wish you'd follow protocol more closely with regard to referring to superiors by their proper title, but it isn't usually a problem."

"Sorry, Captain Nelson." I said.

I grew up with these superiors. I was hanging out with Milton before I was even a recruit. Bao had been like an aunt for as long as I can remember. I didn't know Sally very well when I was young, but she was around Milton sometimes, so I knew her and Liam from then, and Mark had always insisted I refer to him by his first name. I think I remember Bao saying something about me being scared of him when I was two or three, so maybe that's why? I don't know, I just know for as long as I could remember he'd just been Mark, not Dr. Burton, to me.

"Before I forget, I have something for you." he said, reaching into a pocket. "I think you'll be needing these." he told me.

He held up a first officer insignia pin. He motioned me over closer, and when I did he reached out and clipped it on the collar of my dress. He placed it next to my lieutenant insignia, which he took off right after placing the first officer insignia.

"Thank you, Captain Nelson." I said.

"They were mine. Captain Donaldson gave them to me, and he got them from his captain. It's a tradition."

"But how'd you get them back from Liam, then?"

"Ah," he smiled. "I never gave them to Commander Tyler."

"Then Chester?"

"It seems I hadn't gotten around to sharing them with Commander Rowe, either. I guess I was waiting for you, Callie."

"Thank you, sir." I reached up and felt them. "This means a lot."

He held them for me. He knew I'd be first some day. He wanted me to have them, wanted to pass them on like his captain and his captain's captain had. Almost like a parent passing something on to their child. He wasn't quite a father, but sometimes I loved the man almost like he was.

"With things being what they are currently, we are sharing Lieutenant Wilson with Commander Xiang. If we need her for anything she is in our department, but her knowledge of Engineering, as well as the fact that most of that department was lost, means her skills at repairing equipment are needed there."

"Yes, sir, Captain Nelson."

"Stop that." he said, shaking his head. "I liked it better when you called me Milton. The reason I mentioned Wilson is that we're light on crew as well. A lot of our people were in the aft section when it went. I don't know that we have enough ensigns for a full complement on each shift right now."

"Do we really even need a bridge crew right now?" I queried.

"Maybe not, but to help make the crew and passengers feel more like we have things in control, I think we should have a crew on duty."

"I didn't consider that."

"I am suspending OIC duties. It doesn't make much sense right now, since you and I are the only two to cover that duty, and we'll be busy all over the ship."

"That makes sense." I agreed, nodding to him.

"This is an emergency situation, Callie. I need to be able to rely on you. Are you going to be able to handle this?" he asked, seriously wanting to make sure I was.

"As much as anyone." I answered. "I feel kind of numb to it right now. It just doesn't seem real, honestly."

"I know where you're coming from. From here out we don't have time for you to question your decisions or to verify things with me. You make decisions and give orders and I'll back you up one hundred percent, no matter what, got it?"

"Yeah, I guess. Thank you."

"You're going to be in charge of keeping the last of us alive. If I'm going to trust you with that, I may as well start now."

All of humanity rested on my shoulders, so no pressure.

Right.

It felt like I had a shuttle craft sitting on my chest.

“You’re up to this.” he said. “I believe in you, Callie.”

“I’ll be fine.” I said. I didn’t know how true it was, but it was the right thing to say.

“Yes, you will. Now, let’s discuss what we need to do to get ready for this away mission.”

I ran down a list of my thoughts so far, which were mostly what I had mentioned in our meeting before. He had some ideas and suggestions, but basically we were waiting for input from the others before we could move too far along.

“We’re going to need to allow some time for them to all go through some training.” I told him.

“What kind of training did you have in mind? Mostly, Commander Xiang is the one who will need to study up, since I don’t think she’s ever trained for an atmospheric entry.”

“No, I want a second pilot on Thumper.” I insisted. “I don’t like putting everyone’s lives on just one person. If Bao were to get sick, or worse, we need someone else who can do it.”

“Who’d you have in mind?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe Ashley Kre?”

“A good choice.” he said, looking up in thought. “She’s young and strong. That’s definitely a plus.”

“She’s smart, too.” I said.

“And she’s in the right age range for reproduction.”

That blindsided me. I hadn’t given much thought to the idea that the girls would need to get pregnant and have babies for the surviving people to continue and thrive.

“How do we handle genetic diversity?” I asked.

“Handle what?”

“Well, if we have ten girls who all have babies with the same two guys, all the babies will be related to at least half the others.”

“Which is a problem.” he said, now realizing what I was getting at.

“Yes. Not at that point, but eventually it would create more problems the further down you go, with every offspring sharing the same hereditary susceptibilities to diseases and illnesses.”

“The entire colony could be wiped out by a simple virus, if there was a hereditary predisposition in place.” he said.

“Exactly.” I agreed.

“You need to discuss this with Dr. Burton. It’s a concern I

hadn't thought of. He may have some thoughts on the matter. Could be we're worried about nothing."

I pulled my tablet out and made a note to talk to Mark when I could. I also added Ensign Kre to my list of possible crew, and I started a list of what the crew would need to train for before going.

"I think all the crew who goes will need trained in using the pressure suits." I said. "We'll also want them to learn basic first aid."

"And self defense." Milton added. "You will all need to be able to handle things in case one of the twelve loses it and becomes violent toward the others."

"I also want everyone to undergo a full medical evaluation to make sure they don't already have some serious illness they aren't aware of."

I had asthma and was also claustrophobic. Those were both red flags, and I knew I shouldn't be going because of them. They could both be controlled, but I was a liability.

"Milton, I don't think I should be going."

"That is not up for negotiation at this point." he said sternly.

"I'm not… I'm…" I sighed and sat my tablet down. "Nothing has changed with me, okay?" I said.

"You are referring to what, exactly?"

"I'm still gay, Milton." I explained. "I'm not going to be having children, so someone else who–"

"You could. You may also change your mind."

"I'm not going to change my mind and suddenly feel attracted to guys!"

"You are going. It's necessary for someone to be in charge, even if it means that's one less person to contribute children for the future colony."

"Milton, I just–"

"I would like you to go check the lower decks to make sure work is going well there." he said, effectively ending the discussion about me going. "Also, I'm leaving it to you to come up with some way to house all the people down there. We lost a lot more quarters than crew, so all those people need a place to go."

"I'll do what I can."

"Good. Whatever you come up with, I'll back it up."

I made my way down to the lower decks. I stopped in medical to check with Mark, but he was still with a lot of patients. Audry was

not there, some other civilian nurse whose name I could not remember was acting as the receptionist, as well as running around and helping people in the waiting room with small cuts and scrapes.

As I passed people in the passage they would nod and look away. Tears filled nearly every eye, and most people were huddled together in groups, comforting each other. They would look to me, hoping for some kind of good news, and I had nothing to give them. In fact, if I gave them the real news I had, it would be even worse.

They were all going to die.

Maybe not all, maybe someone in the crowd would be chosen to attempt a journey to the unknown moon, praying that there was some way to survive down there. The likelihood of that mission being a success was miniscule, though, so in all likelihood we were all going to be dead in just a few days or weeks.

I ducked into a doorway, just needing to get away from the overwhelming despair in the passage for a moment. I hadn't realized until I saw the sofas that I had managed to enter Awareness.

"Young Callie," Obalesh said, doing one of his deep bows, showing me the wrinkly top of his head. "How are you this morning?"

"Oh, Obalesh. Hi. I'm doing–"

"What an inconsiderate question, forgive me. You are welcome here. We are very full of concerned individuals, as you may imagine, but if you are in need then nobody is turned away from Awareness."

"Oh, no thank you, I just needed–"

"Or perhaps you came to offer comfort to others?"

"I'm sorry, I have a lot–"

"Of course, you are quite busy saving lives, are you not?"

"We–"

"Ah, such is your duty. Though that does not release you from your duty to your fellow man, young Callie. All of us must offer aid and comfort to one another in their time of need. However, you must first take care of their physical well being as well. Have a good day, young Callie." he said, doing his bow thing again, then his fast mini-steps away from me.

I couldn't figure out what just happened? I… was that a conversation? He was a wonderful person, but he confused the heck out of me.

The place was full. Many of the occupants were children who didn't appear to be with any adults. Dear heavenly deity, I sure hoped their parents weren't part of those we had lost. I knew how hard that was.

I walked over to a group of children and sat on the floor before them. None of them looked up at me, even. They all seemed to be zoned out.

"Hi guys." I said, trying to sound like things were going okay. "What are you all doing? Hey, would anyone like to play a game?"

I figured offering to play a game with them would at least get their attention, but none of them responded. Those poor children.

I got up and stepped over to the sofa. I nudged one kid aside, then another, and slid in between them.

"We're all doing everything we can, guys." I told them. I put my arm around the shoulders of the boy on my left and the girl on my right, both of whom were around nine or ten. "You're going to be okay, I promise."

I shouldn't be making promises like that. I couldn't guarantee anything. In fact, I was nearly certain none of them would be okay. None of them would be alive for long.

"I'll tell you what, guys," I said. "I have to get going right now, but if I can find anything, I'll bring some snacks back in a while. What would you all like?"

They were quiet, but at least that got eyes looking up at me. Finally one girl, who looked maybe four, spoke up.

"Can we have ice cream?" she asked.
"I'll see if I can find some, okay? What flavor do you like?"
"Raspberry." she replied.
"Raspberry? I'll, um, see what I can do. Anyone else?"
"Chocolate cupcakes?" a boy asked.
"I'll try." I assured him.

I went down to deck five. People were screaming and crying, and there were some people who had bags full of what appeared to be all of their possessions, or whatever they could find. They had been

ordered out of their quarters by the engineering staff.

"Lieutenant," an Ensign said. She paused. "Um… Commander," she corrected, noticing my insignia. "Ma'am, we're having a hard time getting people to move away from this area of the deck. There are a lot of leaks here ma'am, we're going to have to close the aft three fourths of the deck off. Commander Xiang okayed it, ma'am."

"Is the forward section safe?" I asked her.

"Not really, but there aren't any leaks at this time. We just haven't had a chance to check integrity of seals, though." she told me.

"Right." I used my tablet to trigger the shipwide speakers. "Attention crew and passengers," I said into it, hearing my voice–which I hate–echo out of the speakers on the bulkhead. "This is the first officer, Commander Monroe speaking. Please make sure to remove yourself from deck five at your earliest opportunity. Bring with you only what you can easily carry, and make your way in an orderly fashion to one of the upper decks. If you can congregate on deck six we will attempt to find you a place to sleep as soon as possible. Thank you."

"Thank you, ma'am." the Ensign said.

I made my way back through, trying my best to comfort people as I ushered them off that deck. Some were reluctant. One man, a passenger whose name I did not know, argued with me. I was within about twenty seconds of telling him to stay put and die, but I realized I couldn't do that and live with myself. Not that I was planning to live long anyway. I wound up threatening to call security on him before he would go.

There were so many people sobbing and looking for anyone to just tell them what to do. They were so lost. The only thing I could think was to relocate them to six and work hard to find temporary housing for everyone.

"Attention!" Bao said over the shipwide. "We have severe leaks on deck six. Everything forward of room six fifty on deck six will be sealed off in five minutes. Anyone who hasn't moved in five minutes will be sealed off from the rest of the ship and will run out of air quickly. The rest of deck six aft of six fifty is fine, and people in those areas can remain where they are at this time. Thank you."

More people to find a temporary home for. Great. We were going to have to make people share their quarters. I just hoped it wasn't a problem. Surely people could share for a short time. Though I

didn't know if telling them it was a short time would make matters go any better. People were going to panic when they got confirmation that they were all going to die.

My tablet vibrated, signalling that I had a message. I pulled up the message screen to read the message from Anna.

*Where are you? I need to see you when you have time.*

I sent a reply, telling her my location and letting her know that I was planning to head up to deck six soon.

Before I was completely done with deck five, she had found me. She bowled into me, nearly knocking me over, as she wrapped me in a hug.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Doing okay." I said. I could see that she had been crying again. "It's going to be okay."

"No it's not. Callie, this ship is beyond repair. We can't even steer!"

"Shh!" I said, holding my finger up. "Keep it down." I told her. "We're trying not to panic people."

"But–"

"We have a plan." I assured her.

"What plan? There can't be a plan."

"We can't talk here. I'll tell you later, if you can come to my quarters?"

"Let me know as soon as you're there." she said. Tears rolled out.

"You're going to be okay." I told her. I hugged her tighter. "I promise, you are going to make it through this."

I hoped that wasn't an empty promise. I prayed that our plan to send people down to that moon worked. I had a feeling it would, though. And my gut told me people could survive there. I didn't know how, I didn't know why, but I could just feel it. It was going to work.

"I have to go up to six and start figuring out where we can put people." I told her.

"What do you mean, put people?"

I explained the situation, about how I was going to assign shared quarters for everyone, probably even including officers. She

offered to help take care of it, and I accepted. I was going to need as much help as I could get.

Together, Anna and I went up to a very packed deck six. I had trouble seeing around people. Anna, being several inches taller than I was, could see somewhat better, and she helped me navigate the crowd.

It was so noisy! Everyone was talking at once, and there was shouting going on. At one point I was sure a group down one passage was singing hymns of some sort, and a group down another passage were screaming about it being every man for himself now, and they needed to protect their families.

"I don't even know where to begin." I told Anna. "How do we figure out where to put everyone?"

"Actually, room assignments are more up to my mother's division, usually." she told me, yelling to be heard. "She isn't too happy with either of us right now, by the way."

"What about?" I asked.

"Because I admitted to her how I feel about you."

"You what?" I asked, surprised. "Anna,"

"I've liked you, *really* liked you, for two years, Callie. It freaked me out before, because you were too young. Now you're not, and I don't have time to be tiptoeing around my feelings and hiding things anymore. And that means telling my parents, okay?"

"But Anna,"

"It's okay if you don't care as much for me as I do you. I kind of expected that. I just can't pretend anymore. I'm probably…" She looked around. "You know what is probably going to happen."

I really didn't know what to say to that. She really cared about me, obviously. But I needed to concentrate on saving lives. On saving the human race.

I couldn't be in a relationship right then.

I couldn't *not* be, though.

She had to go down to that moon. I didn't even care if anyone else lived, Anna had to. I wished I could save everyone, but I couldn't. I wanted Milton to live, and I wanted Bao to live. I even wanted Sally and Jonathan Wilson to live. But I *needed* Anna to live.

It took hours, but we started a list of people who would need a place to stay. I promised them I would do my best to find places in the next few days, and until then I encouraged them to try to find comfortable places in the passageways and public spaces as much as possible.

The cafeteria was packed when I went in, but I had too much to do to wait in line. For the first time ever, I used the privilege of my rank to cut in line.

"Hi, Doreen. Hey, I know you don't usually serve, and you're busy with the register, but do you have any ice cream hidden anywhere? Maybe some raspberry? I promised it to some children earlier."

"I think so, Miss Callope. Let me go check." she said. She looked harried today.

"Thank you, Doreen. Maybe some chocolate cupcakes too?"

"I know we have those, I had one right before work."

Four minutes and a lot of grumbling from the other crew and passengers who were waiting in line, and Doreen returned with a bucket full of ice cream and almost two dozen cupcakes. She handed them over, and when I signaled to pay she just shook her head and shooed me away.

I made my way toward Awakenings, looking around to spot Anna following me several steps back. As soon as I was through the door I was greeted by Obalesh again. He kept the greeting short this time, and *almost* let me finish a sentence as I tried to explain what I planned.

"Who ordered ice cream?" I asked.

The little girl from earlier was there, and her eyes lit up in delight. In fact, all the children were still there. The little boy who wanted cupcakes looked as delighted as the girl. As I went to pass the snacks out, I realized I hadn't gotten spoons or bowls. Anna to the rescue, though, and she held up a stack of paper cups and some plastic spoons.

The children almost seemed to forget their troubles for a little while as they ate their ice cream from cups. It was nice to see one or two of them smile, even if only for a moment.

Of course then things came crashing back down for them when they finished up their snacks and reality snuck back in.

As much as I wanted to stay with them, I had too many things to do. Anna and I both had to go. She received a call from Bao that she needed to go help with some preparations on the work needed for the Thumper. I needed to get to work trying to figure out what we could do to help those who go down to the moon, if we made it close enough to try that.

I worked late into the night, moving from one division to the next, talking to not only the commanders, but to those directly under them, to see what I could do to help the ship survive as long as possible.

And when I could get them alone for a while, I spoke to the commanders about who should and shouldn't go on an away mission, if there was to be one. I got a lot of good suggestions from people.

I went back to my quarters around twenty two hundred so I could try to get at least a little sleep. I was pretty sure there wouldn't be much, but I would at least try.

I showered, took my Amblipen, and tried hard to clear my mind and ignore the work that was needed, if only for just a few minutes.

I kept coming back to all the people who would die. Sally, Mark, even Liam would be hard for me to see die. And I knew there were hundreds more. Maybe even those kids in Awareness. And Milton. Of course Milton.

My door buzzed. I hadn't expected anyone, and as exhausted as I was I just wanted to ignore it. But I couldn't. I got up and answered the door.

"Hi." Anna said. "Can I come in?"

"Um," I said, looking down to see a big duffle bag at her feet. "Sure."

"Thanks."

I stepped aside so she could enter, and she bent to gather her bag before stepping through the door. She was a little out of sorts.

"How are you holding up?" she asked, her eyes starting to tear up.

"Kind of numb, actually." I told her. "You're going to live through this, Anna." I told her.

I faced a dilemma: tell her about our plans or not? I had to. I had to put her mind at ease as much as I could, even if it wasn't enough. I had to. My heart ached at the very idea that she may not live.

"Why don't you sit down," I suggested. "I need to tell you something, and it's important."

"I need to tell *you* something important, too." she said.

She moved to my sofa, leaving her bag on the floor near the end. I got some bottles of water and took a seat next to her, handing her one.

"Thanks." she said. "So, um, is it okay if I go first? Before I lose my nerve?"

"Um, I… guess."

"Good." she said. She smiled and wiped at her eyes before turning to look straight at me. "I'm not concerned about myself, Callie. I just… I mean I am, but that isn't what is first on my mind."

"Actually, that's what I want to talk to you about."

"The thing is, I know I'm going to die." she said. She wiped at her eyes again. "So is everyone else, and I can deal with that. I mean I can't, but… ya know?"

"Yeah." I told her, nodding and trying not to think too much about the idea.

"I don't want anyone to die, of course. My parents." She shook her head and took a drink from the bottle. "But, um… see, the thing is I haven't been completely honest about something. Or… at least I haven't been completely forthcoming."

"About what?" I asked, feeling my heart rate ramp up. I wasn't sure I could take any more surprises right then.

"I said I have been interested in you for a while, and that's not entirely true."

"Oh."

I felt my heart sink. I was holding up pretty well to all the death around me, to being *responsible* for that death, but this was going to cause me to cry?

"I think you were fourteen still," she said. "And we were in my quarters, doing homework. Something to do with navigation, I think. You had your head down, reading from your tablet, and I looked up at you and realized it."

"Reali–"

"I was in, uh… What I mean is that I… really, *really* liked you. Like, more than *like*, ya know."

"Y-you–"

"Uh! This isn't coming out right! I thought you were hot, and sweet, and I just really wanted to… well, kiss you, hug you, I don't even know what… just be around you all the time. But that scared the hell out of me! I mean you're… you *were* just a kid. At least it seemed that way to me. I was so creeped out by those feelings. I mean I was only sixteen, but you were only fourteen!"

"Oh. So… so… um?" I had no idea how to navigate the conversation at that point.

"So I put those feelings away. Way away, where I'd never feel them again, and I went on with being friends with you as much as I could."

"So you don't still, um…"

"And then you graduated and I stopped seeing you all the time. It made it easier at first, but then I missed you so much that it was making me ill."

I wasn't sure what she was getting at. She had been attracted to me, but wasn't anymore? That's what it sounded like.

"And then you came back into my life. It brought all that back out. And I couldn't hide it anymore."

"Oh." I said, still not sure, but hopeful that she meant she still had feelings for me. "So…"

"So I'm in…" she paused and glanced away, kneading her hands together. "I really want to be with you, Callie. For as long as we can, anyway. I care more about you than I even knew, and the thought of you dying is just… *unbearable*."

Well crap, she still had feelings for me. I hadn't thought that was possible. It felt weird to even think that. It was like a beautiful, wonderful dream. And I was stunned.

"Say something." She whispered.

"You're not going to die." I told her. I felt tears on my cheeks. "You can't. We're going to figure this out."

"Callie, I know this ship isn't going to last much longer. We're

all going to die."

"We have a plan." I told her.

I went through all that we were planning for the away mission, and I explained that it was risky and unlikely to succeed, but that I was going to figure out a way to make sure it did.

"That's wonderful news, Callie." she said when I was finished.

"I like you too." I said. "Like that, I mean."

I hadn't planned to. I wasn't even completely sure what to call my feelings at that point, precisely. Mostly because I had no idea. Maybe it was love? Looking back, maybe. But I didn't even know what love was. At least that kind of love. I wasn't sure, so I had to give it more thought.

"You do?" she asked, smiling.

"Yes." I told her.

"Good." she said, staring up into my eyes and smiling. "Can I sleep on your sofa?"

The abrupt change in the course of the conversation had me thrown for a moment, and then I remembered her bag. I looked down at it, trying to figure out the answer I should give. Which was rather obvious.

"Definitely." I told her. "What happened?"

"Oh, my parents would not stop screaming at me. My father is certain that we are the cause of all of this, that we are bringing about the end times. My mother is tired of the arguing, and blames me for that."

"I'm sorry, Anna. It's not fair for them to put all that on you like that."

"Yeah, well…"

That basically summed it up. Her father was NOCO before being a father, at that point. His religious views were more important to him than his daughter was. Or maybe not, maybe that wasn't fair. Maybe he just felt strongly that she was doing something wrong and was still trying to figure out how to correct what he viewed as a horrible mistake.

Her mother, though, was clearly choosing Anna's father over her. At least it seemed that way to me. I didn't think Sally was

specifically anti-gay herself, I think she just loved her husband so much that she would bow to his will.

I hoped they would come to their senses soon, but I wasn't going to hold my breath.

"Maybe I should take the sofa." I told Anna.
"Not a chance!"
"I don't sleep half the time, anyway." I argued.

She seemed to be considering it, but after a moment she shook her head no. I just wanted her to be comfortable. I wanted her to get a good night.

"I can't let you give up your bed, Callie. I'll be fine out here."
"Anna,"
"Don't make me put you in a headlock."

She would do it, too. She was so much larger than I was, physically. Not just height, but muscle mass. I was scrawny compared to her. I think that was part of what I found attractive, though. That she took care of herself.

I agreed, grudgingly, and we wished each other a good night. I went into my bedroom and closed the door, then changed into my pajamas and sat on the edge of my bed.

There was no way I was going to be able to sleep. As exhausted as I was, my brain wouldn't shut down.

I took my tablet out and began reviewing my messages instead. Bao had messaged both Milton and I that she had a handle, at least temporarily, on environmental systems. She said they were lagging, though, and she thought we'd eventually have to consider moving more people and sealing off more of the ship so that the air cleaners could keep up.

While it was good news that we'd have air for a while, I didn't look forward to jamming everyone into an even smaller space. And it would be my responsibility to do so.

I got messages from Mark and Liam with suggestions about what to consider when selecting the away crew. Mark had given some thought to my concerns about genetic diversity. His answer was very

simple: send frozen sperm. It was a good answer, I suppose. Assuming we could keep our freezers working.

He also suggested we take Colton. I could never figure out why Mark liked him so much. He was an okay guy, I guess, but he always annoyed me so much.

Liam had some ideas about what equipment we'd need. He thought we should be able to test the soil and water to make sure they were safe. The shuttle sensors could be configured to test the air, he thought, and he was already in contact with Bao about doing that.

Milton had sent me a message almost three hours before, asking about my progress on housing for the displaced crew. I had to reply to him that I hadn't made much, that I hadn't had time yet. I also explained that I was working on the crew for the landing mission, and again stressed that I should *not* be going. It seemed unfair to send the one person aboard who should have been able to stop the horrible loss of life that we were incurring.

I got a reply almost instantly. Milton wanted me to stop working on helping the displaced workers and start paying as much attention as possible to our mission to land people on that moon. It was on. Milton had heard from Bao, she had gotten some thrusters working and we would be able to turn the ship.

And then I got a message from an address I didn't recognize. It was very threatening. If I didn't take one last chance to ask for forgiveness for my "gay lifestyle" I would be put out an airlock.

## Chapter Eleven

Three days later things seemed to be going okay, other than intermittent power outages in some areas. Not fabulous, obviously, but we had been able to turn the ship toward the moon and were slowly beginning in that direction. Sally had managed to find quarters for nearly all of the people who had been rendered homeless by the closing–or destruction–of their own quarters. I had even managed to get recommendations from the commanders for crew to send, and had a tentative list of who would be going.

I was not included in that list. At least not in the version I had for myself. After trying to convince Milton that I shouldn't be going, and him insisting I go, I decided I'd make the change at the last minute, when it was too late for him to counter my order. I just hoped I'd be able to make it stick.

It felt bad to hide things from him. I had never been one to hide things. At least not from Milton. Sometimes I wasn't completely forthcoming with others, such as when I didn't exactly advertise being gay, but this was pretty much an outright lie. Not only to Milton, but to Bao, Sally, Liam, Mark, and even Anna.

Anna thought I'd be going with her. I just couldn't, though. She would hate me for not going, but I hoped she'd forgive me when she thought about it later.

The past three days we had spent so much time just chatting about random things that had nothing at all to do with the terrible tragedy around us. We needed to distract ourselves, I guess. But what happened is I ended up feeling drawn more and more to her.

I realized at that point that my feelings for her were much stronger than I had thought. It made letting her go off to that moon without me even more difficult. But at the same time, more important. After all, I was pretty sure I wasn't the right person to lead the last chance for humanity, and I needed her to survive and be a part of that

group.

We were eating breakfast in the cafeteria that morning when alarms started bleeting loudly. Anna and I both were up to our feet immediately, yanking our tablets out of our pockets as we hurried through the crowd that had gathered for the NOCO meeting, into the passageway. We desperately scrambled to find out what was going on and where, so we could respond.

But we were there already.

An automated alarm had tripped, showing that there was an air pressure leak in the kitchen behind the cafeteria. Anna and I took a second to look at each other before we turned and reentered the cafeteria.

"Everybody out!" I shouted.
"Out, out!" Anna yelled. "Move!"

Some people listened, and some did not. All of those who did not were standing with the NOCO group. Anna and I were headed toward the kitchen to assess the situation, but we were confronted with the stream of kitchen staff who were rushing from the area.

Once we made it through to the kitchen, we found two crewmembers doing their best to shut down the grease fire that had begun on one of the large stoves. I could hear the whistling sound as the air rushed out an opening in the far bulkhead, though.

"Get out now!" I told them.
"We have to put this out." one of them said.
"We're losing air!" Anna told them. "Get out while you still can."
"If this fire spreads it could do a lot of damage, Lieutenant." the man said.
"Get out!" I repeated. "I'm sealing the kitchen off, the fire will go out without any oxygen."

They took a moment to look at each other before turning and sprinting for the door. I ushered Anna outside, and I entered the proper command codes to temporarily shut off the kitchen. It wasn't a complete seal, that would require the Engineering department to physically seal things off, but it cut most of the ventilation and sealed off all of the doors except the pass through to the cafeteria. I closed it

and latched it shut behind me, but I could hear small amounts of air whistling past it.

And when I turned I was met with a crowd of faces. NOCO members. They hadn't all left. In fact, a large percentage had not left.

"This will not hold. You need to relocate so I can close off the cafeteria as well. Those doors are better sealed, and–"

"We are prepared for the end." Marshawn Lincoln said loudly, and others murmured in agreement. "You sinful creatures have brought us to this, but we are confident that we will soon see the face of our God. Can you say the same?"

"You have to go!" Anna told the crowd. "Please people, just leave this area. You can reconvene somewhere else, but you need to get out."

"This is your fault!" Ensign Bowman said, and there were cheers of support. "You pervert the will of God with your homo lifestyle and we all will suffer!"

"Damn gays! It's *you* who should be dying, not us!" a civilian told us. "You're going to burn in Hell!"

"Hey!" Chief Wesley, from Administration shouted, as he walked over near Anna and me. "You got a problem with me?"

"Not with you, with *them!*" the civilian said.

"You have a problem with the commander then you have a problem with me. You want to make something of it?"

"Me too." Autumn Forrester, an Ensign from my division, said, stepping to Wesley's side. "I'm gay. Wanna make something of it?"

"This is your fault!" Ensign Bowman said. "If you had any decency left you'd kill yourselves in hopes that the rest of us would be saved from condemnation!"

"They'll never have the guts to do that!" the civilian said.

"Then we should help!" another, slightly drunk sounding, member shouted.

The next thing I knew there were three people approaching us, and Marshawn is telling them to not sink to our level.

I stepped back and triggered an alert for security to come immediately–which they should have already done because of the alarm–and watched as two more people stepped from the crowd to confront our two supporters.

Things happened quickly then.

Knives were drawn. A section of pipe appeared from nowhere.

Chief Wesley's chest and arm were sliced.

Autumn Forrester was bashed repeatedly in the head.

It was probably only twenty seconds later when security arrived and broke things up. It was a very large security contingent, and they had weapons, so it didn't take them long to clear the area.

"Mark," I said into my tablet. I had triggered the emergency comm on his tablet, allowing me to immediately broadcast, whether he was busy or not. "We need help in the cafeteria, immediately."

"Be there in one minute, hon." was his response.

I bent down next to Wesley and tried to put pressure on his chest wound as he gurgled, trying to speak.

"Mark is on the way. Hang in there." I told him. I felt my eyes tearing up. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this, Wesley."

I should have taken that email threatening me more seriously. If I had, maybe I could have had some arrests made. Maybe that would have settled some people down. Maybe that would have let them know they were being watched. Maybe security would have kept a closer eye on them.

I should have done something about those emails. It could have been Anna laying there. I didn't want anyone to get hurt because of my failure to act, but especially not her.

"How is Autumn?" I asked Anna.

"She's… uh…" she said, hesitating. I looked up to meet Anna's eyes and she shook her head. "She didn't make it."

When Mark appeared he glanced at Autumn, shook his head, then immediately rushed over to Mister Wesley. He bent over him, shoving my hands away. He mumbled under his breath, then looked up at me.

"What happened here?" he asked me.

"There was a huge crowd of NOCO people," Anna began. "And–"

"We have to get out of here." I said, interrupting. "Can he be

moved, Mark?"

"I don't know if it'll make any difference. I will get some orderlies down here with a stretcher so we can–"

"There's no time. I have to seal this area." I said. "Can we just drag him into the passage?"

Mark nodded his head, and he and Anna and I all grabbed onto Wesley's arms and pulled him into the passageway. I immediately entered the commands into my tablet to seal off the cafeteria.

And then noticed the blood. There was a trail of it where we dragged Wesley, but that wasn't what had caught my attention first. My tablet screen was covered in blood. I looked down at my hands and saw that they were also covered. In fact, I was soaked in it head to toe.

That pretty much convinced me that Mister Wesley wouldn't be surviving the attack. And he didn't.

I used my bloody tablet to order security personnel. to look at the camera footage from the cafeteria and arrest whoever was responsible immediately.

"It's too late." Mark told the orderlies who were arriving at that point. "Just get him back to Medical. We'll clean him up some before contacting his wife."

He was married. I hadn't thought of that. I pulled up his personnel record and verified his wife's name and where their quarters were. And I saw that he had three kids, Adam, Joseph and Cheyenne.

"Are you okay, Callie?" Mark asked. "Is all this blood his?"

"I'm okay." I said, my voice shaky.

"And you, Miss Wilson?"

"I'm not hurt, Doctor." she said.

"Glad to hear it."

"I…" I didn't want to do it, but I had to. "I'll go talk to his wife."

"There's no need for that. I can take care of it, hon. It's a sad part of my job."

"No!" I said. "I… I'll do it."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Mark asked.

"Yes." I said. No, I wasn't sure, but I had to do it.

I started to walk away, but Anna grabbed onto my arm to stop me. She stared at me for a moment, tears in her eyes. She just stood like that for a moment.

"I'll go with you." she offered.

"This is my duty." I told her.

"I'm going." she insisted. "But you need to wash up and change first. You're covered in blood."

She was right, I was covered. I hadn't even thought what that would be like when I was talking to his family. It was going to be one of the hardest things I had ever done.

We hurried back to my quarters, which were by then basically *our* quarters, and I took a quick shower, trying not to think about the blood of the dead man I had all over me.

At Wesley's quarters I froze. I couldn't buzz their door. Finally Anna did it for me. A moment later a woman met me at the door as it slid open.

"Yes? Oh, Commander!" she said. I had never met this woman, as far as I could remember. "Phil isn't here right now. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I, um, ca-came to talk to you, Mrs. Wesley." I said.

"Oh, please call me Sara." she said, stepping aside and motioning us in. "Phil talks about you all the time, how he's so impressed by you. He is always telling our daughter that she can be anything she wants, just like you."

"He is?" I asked. I should have said was, I guess, but she didn't know that yet.

"Yes. Oh, would you please have a seat?"

"Yes, ma'am. Um," I said, stepping toward a chair. "This is Lieutenant Anna Wilson, our second officer."

"It's good to see you, Miss Wilson. I know your parents well, they are good people. I used to live next door to your mother when I was little."

"Hi, Mrs… Sara." Anna said. She sat in another chair.

The Wesleys' children came chasing each other into the room then. Adam was ten, Joseph was nine, and Cheyenne was seven. She was at the back of the pack, and she stopped chasing after her brothers when she saw us. She looked scared suddenly, and she

started crying.

"Chey?" Sara said. "What's wrong?"

Cheyenne ran from the room in tears. Sara excused herself for a moment to check on her daughter. When she returned she was smiling. She took a seat across from me and Anna.

"I'm sorry about that. Cheyenne seems to be convinced you have bad news about her daddy. I don't know where she got that idea, but–"

"Sara," I said. I leaned forward. "There was… um…" A what? A fight? A conflict?

"An incident." Anna provided.

"What kind of incident?" Sara asked her. "Something with the ship? Philip says that we're going to be okay, that the captain and senior crew will figure something out."

"Sara, there was an incident in the cafeteria." I explained. "Philip and another crewmember stepped in, trying to help, and… um… I'm so sorry, Sara." I said. I needed to tell her, but I couldn't seem to find the words.

"Sorry about what?" she asked. I could see she was already making the connection, though. "Is Phil hurt?"

"He, uh, didn't… um…" I shook my head.

"Didn't what?" she asked. She knew, though. I could tell.

"He didn't make it, ma'am." Anna told her.

"I'm so sorry, Sara." I managed to say.

She went hysterical and started screaming at us, telling us we were making things up, that this was a cruel joke, that we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

And eventually, after five solid minutes of screaming, she seemed to accept that we were telling the truth. By then all her children were gathered around her, huddling together with her.

"Philip is in Medical." I said. "I ordered security to review the footage to see who did it. They will be dealt with, Sara. I'm very sorry, ma'am."

I motioned toward the door and Anna and I rose and started to leave. But Anna gripped my shoulder and stopped me.

"Is there anyone we can contact to come sit with you?" Anna

asked Sara.

"Just leave." Sara told us. "Please."

That was one of the hardest things I had ever done in my life. Telling someone in person that their husband, that the father of their children, won't be coming home was… awful. It got to me, and the second I was around the corner from their door, I collapsed against the wall and cried. For Sara and the kids, and for all the other Saras and kids on the ship whose husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, wouldn't be coming home because I didn't see the danger in time.

"Attention all passengers and crew." Milton's voice came over the comm. "As of this time I am giving security full authorization to ensure the safety of the crew, as well as passengers, using any force they deem necessary, up to and including lethal force. Further, I am ordering that no large assemblies take place in public locations. There will be an update on this, as well as our progress on getting the ship repaired, sometime later on today. That is all."

My tablet–which Anna had very sweetly cleaned for me while I had showered–beeped to let me know there was a priority messag. I unfolded it to see that that Milton had called a meeting for senior officers in twenty minutes.

"I have to go to this." I told Anna, showing her the message. "Will you be okay alone for a while?"

"I will." she said. "How about you?"

"I'll be fine. Please avoid those insane NOCO people while I'm away."

"You too, Callie." She said, hugging me. "I'm going back to your quarters for now."

"Anna… I just… I'm so sorry for all of this."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"Yeah, uh, I just… I better go."

She gave me a quick kiss, then a gentle shove down the passageway to get me started. I hurried to the conference room, trying not to think too much about what had happened in the cafeteria.

All the blood.

At the conference room I paused to catch a breath before entering. Three passengers, who probably shouldn't have even been in the area, passed me by and gave me a very grave looking smile. I felt

their pain from those smiles. They had not only lost someone, but had probably come to the conclusion that we were all dead.

Mark was in the conference room this time. He seemed very tired. I imagine he hadn't slept much, but at his age he really needed to watch that. We needed him. I patted his back on the way around to my seat, and he smiled up at me. Liam followed me in, which meant with Bao, Sally and Milton already seated, we were all there.

"I'm not going to drag this out," Milton said. "Things are even worse than we thought. Bao?"

"Yes, uh," she said. She looked more shaken than I had ever seen her. "Time is up, people. As shitty as is, it seems we're all screwed. All of us."

There was a moment when we each looked around at everyone else's eyes, trying to make sense of what she had said. Nobody seemed to know what to make of what she had just told us.

"Would you care to elaborate on that, Commander?" Sally asked her.

"I've failed you." Bao responded. "We're not getting close enough to even consider launching Thumper, and we're out of time. We could launch it, but it would run out of fuel long before it achieved the proper vector to intercept the moon at the correct point in its orbit. We're going to run out of battery power sometime in about three days or so, probably, and–"

"Well why the hell don't we have people conserving energy?" Liam asked.

"Because it won't matter. Maybe it would buy us a few hours. Part of the issue is that a lot of our battery packs were damaged when the back end of the ship broke off. It created a massive power surge, which some of the surge suppressors blocked, but some didn't. We lost a lot of batteries when they shorted from that, and from other damage. They weren't going to last more than maybe five days more, anyway."

"Generators?" Milton asked. He obviously knew the answer, but needed to prod her to move on.

"All dead. We don't even have the time or equipment to build more. Plus our air filters have degraded to the point that they aren't doing a lot. We keep springing more and more leaks, and I have barely any crew left who knows enough to go around and even attempt repairs. We're basically out of propellent, and will probably be out of that a few days from now, assuming we live that long. We're

just screwed."

"There must be something we can do." Mark said. His eyes were begging her, and I never saw him like that before that.

And then I noticed Milton watching me, his eyes getting teary. Mark and Bao noticed, and both looked at me as well. I didn't know if I had missed a cue, and it was my turn to tell people how bad it was or what. But then I noticed Bao and Mark getting weepy as well.

"I don't have any answers." I whispered.

"Eun-ji would be so upset that I couldn't save you." Bao told me. She actually began to cry then.

Mark and Milton both let tears trickle down their faces then. Because of me? Everyone was upset that *I'd* die? That didn't make sense, *everyone* was going to die. But then again, I was the youngest there. Maybe I was just a proxy for all the young people on the ship that they were upset for.

Sally rubbed her eyes and stared down at a paper in front of her. She seemed… depressed? Which made perfect sense, I guess. Liam was just staring at the bulkhead, concentrating.

"What?" I asked him.

"Just considering possibilities." he said.

"What pos–"

"Bao, could we use the last of our fuel to create a crude booster for the shuttle?" he asked.

"I don't even know." she said. She tilted her head back. "Maybe. I'd need to do some numbers to see if it would be enough to achieve the speed necessary."

"Do the numbers, Bao." Milton ordered. "Now, please. In the meantime, Commander Monroe, would you like to share with us your progress on the away crew?"

She could do the numbers, but I didn't know if something like this was really going to work. Just from what I understood, I didn't think it would help unless we had a lot more than we could possibly cobble together for a booster.

"Callie?" Milton prodded.

"Oh, um," I pulled my tablet out and unfolded, bringing up my list. I had it memorized, but I wanted to be certain not to miss anyone. "What I've come up with so far is Bao, Anna–"

“Ann won’t be going.” Sally interrupted.

“Anna *is* going.” I told her.

“No, she’s–”

“She’s the only other engineer I have who I trust and who is young enough.” Bao said.

“You’ll simply have to find someone else.” Sally said, sounding very sure of herself.

“Commander,” I said, trying very hard to remain respectful. “If Anna does not go, this shuttle isn’t going to fly.”

“That’s preposterous.” Liam said. “Miss Monroe, you simply can’t–”

“It’s not flying.” I said. “At least not if I’m onboard.”

It’s not flying with me, whether she’s onboard or not, actually. But Milton would never accept that. This is the only threat I had right then.

“You feel that strongly about this?” Milton asked. I nodded to him. “This is your command, Commander Monroe,” he said, swiveling his head toward Sally. “We can’t force Anna to go, Commander,” he told Sally. “So why don’t we let her decide this?”

“She won’t leave.” Sally told him.

“If Anna refuses to go, Callie?” Bao asked me.

“I… uh…” How could she ever refuse? Of course she won’t. “If she decides not to go on her own, then… I mean it’s up to her.”

“She’ll be staying with her family, then.” Sally told me.

“She won’t.” I said.

“Let this go for now, hon.” Mark said, his face imploring me to drop it.

“Yes, let’s move on.” Milton said.

“Okay, uh, I also have Ensign Ashley Kre from Command, Dr. Gershawn, Ensign Switzer from Medical, Ensign Debartolo from Command, Chief Preston from Science, Chief Aton Kouri from Science, Chief Duval from Administration, Ensign Pok from Administration, and a civilian, Shauna Cook.”

There was a quiet moment where they each looked around at each other. Eventually most of them nodded. I didn’t tell them about Milica Vasilyev, who would be replacing me.

“That’s only eleven.” Sally said, staring daggers at me.

“No, that’s twelve.” I told her.

“You need to plan for Anna not going.”

“Anna is–”

“It’s a valid point.” Liam told me. “Not just for the younger Miss Wilson, but a last minute replacement in case someone else can’t make it.”

“Fine.” I said, nodding. It’s true, that’s a good point. “Milica Vasilyev, another civilian.” I added to the list.

“I think that’s a good list.” Milton said. He nodded. “You’ve got crew from each division, as well as some civilians in there. Most of them are reasonably young, yet old enough to help the group survive. Good work, Commander.”

“Thank you.” I said.

“I’ve got numbers.” Bao said, looking up.

She was smiling, and I knew that she had figured out how to make it all work. At least well enough to give us an outside shot.

“It’s not going to be pretty, but I think we can make it. We’ll need to time the launch just perfect, though, so make our intercept window with the moon. We won’t have power or maneuvering fuel to wait for it to come around the planet again if we miss.”

“What will it involve?” I asked.

“We’re going to create a really big booster and strap it to the top of Thumper. We’ll have to scavenge some of the Freedom’s thrusters, but we won’t be needing them anyway.”

“And it’ll work?” Milton asked her.

“If we get it done in time. We’ll need it in like, two days. Maybe less. Damn, this is going to be tough. It sure as hell isn’t going to be an efficient design, that’s for sure.”

“But it’ll work?” I asked again.

“Yeah, kiddo, I just said it would. But it’s going to be a hell of a crunch. Tyler, I need anyone from your department who can weld and all the welders you can spare.”

“Certainly.” he said, nodded. He had a wide smile, and it looked really creepy on him. “I have seven, I think.”

“Good. And Captain,” she said, turning to Milton. “I gotta get on this now.”

She didn’t even wait for confirmation, just stood and hurried out the door. We all watched her go, and when I turned back at the table everyone was looking at me again, expectantly.

“I better get the away crew rounded up.” I said.

My tablet beeped, as did Liam’s and Milton’s. I pulled mine over and saw that Bao had messaged the three of us with her design

and the numbers.

"According to these numbers, you're going to have to launch late the day after tomorrow." Milton said.

"And the fuel will be really close when they get there." I added. "In fact, it's going to be close to out by the time they land."

"If you don't all blow up from this booster design." Liam added.

"Liam!" Sally shouted.

"I'm sure it'll be fine, Callie." Mark said, reaching over to pat my shoulder.

"Oh, sorry." Liam said, looking contrite.

It hadn't even registered as a worry to me, honestly. I guess it should have; he wasn't wrong. I should have been worried. Not only were these going to be the last humans ever, but Anna would be among them.

And even if Sally was right, and Anna didn't want to go, I'd make her. Somehow.

"Milton, if I could gather the landing crew up to prepare them…" I said. I trailed off, not knowing what to prepare them for. If I had known, they wouldn't be laying here dying, that's for sure.

"Go." he said. Then, as I was standing "Be careful. I'm going to let the ship know what is going on soon. Expect panic, maybe even violence. I'm going to assign security to each of your crew."

"Thank you."

I messaged each of the away crew and the alternate and had them all meet me at the captain's ready room next to the bridge. I made sure they all knew to come immediately, and drop whatever else they were doing, making it an order.

When they started arriving I greeted each at the door and told them to have a seat at the table. When we ran out of room there, I had the rest of them sit along one wall together.

It was very scary to face them all, knowing that most of them had no idea how bad things were, really, and knowing that I was supposed to be leading them on an away mission to save humanity.

"Anna, secure the door, please." I said. She nodded and stood. "And would everyone please put your tablets away until further

notice."

I pulled up my own tablet and accessed the system controls, killing network access to each member of the group. I didn't want the news getting out yet, and if one of them panicked and sent a message to a family member it would be all over the ship in five minutes or less.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began, remaining standing at one end of the room. "I called you all here because you have been chosen to participate in an away mission." I turned to face Milica Vasilyev directly. "Miss Vasilyev, you are an alternate on this, and will not take part unless someone else cannot go, or chooses not to."

"Part of what?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm getting to that. Anna, if you

could use your credentials to set the lock to prevent anyone else from opening it, then have a seat, I'll go on."

"How do I–"

"Enter star, then 2187, then star, then your second officer code." I told her.

"Got it."

She hurried to lock the door down so that none of the others would be able to open the lock from the inside. By setting the lock that way, only her and officers above her in the chain of command could open the door. There were only a handful of doors on Freedom that had that feature, but the ready room was one of them, as were the bridge and the captain's quarters.

"Things are bad for UNSC Freedom." I told them. They all nodded, knowing this much already. "It isn't going to survive." I gave a second for them to digest that. "*You,*" I told them, "Are the crew that will be leaving the day after tomorrow."

"And everyone else?" Shauna asked. "Our families and friends?"

"I'm sorry Shauna, but no." I said, shaking my head.

I let them chatter for a minute. Cry. I mean stars, I was crying again, so why shouldn't they? But after a minute I shouted for them to let me continue.

"Earth is gone. It has been gone for a long time, I guess. There were–"

"What do you mean, gone?!" Chief Preston asked.

"The captain has confirmation, which has been handed down from captain to captain for a long time now. Earth is uninhabitable. Nobody survives. And all of the other ships are gone, too."

"You can't know that." Ensign Kre said.

"We know it, Ashley. I'm sorry." I told her.

"We're it?" Anna asked.

"Freedom is the last ship." I told her. "And the people in this room are leaving the day after tomorrow to try to land on that moon. You will be the last humans alive, and if we're going to have a chance to save the species every one of you will have to work very hard."

They all looked around at each other for a moment, wiping away tears. A few hugged each other, or squeezed hands in support. A couple pulled their tablets out, I'm assuming to send messages off, but found their access cutoff.

"Milton will be letting the rest of the ship know soon, but we need to get a start on things if we're going to be ready to launch tomorrow." I told them all.

I was actually pretty shocked when everyone calmed down enough that I could explain the plans for the launch. There was actually some pretty good input from some of them regarding how to prepare for the days after landing. One of the more obvious being the recommendation we take a tent, just in case the air was breathable and we couldn't stay on the Thumper.

Which was assuming there was air to breathe, actually.

If the air wasn't breathable, they'd have a very short stay anyway. I couldn't even begin to tell you how long it would take a dozen people to die from the built up gases if they all had to stay in the Thumper. The worst part of that was that, should that disaster come, they'd have nothing to do except sit around and watch each other die.

Part of the way through our discussion about the away mission the comm crackled to life. Something was apparently wrong with it, it popped and hissed as Milton's voice spilled from it, letting the entire ship know what I had told the assembled group over an hour before. Some of them wanted to go spend time with their families, but I held them up until we had a chance to hash out the details as much as possible.

Our meeting finally broke up when the buzzer on the door sounded.

"Miss Monroe," Milton's voice sounded over the comm. "If you please, I'd like to see you."

"Okay everyone, go on back to your quarters and spend the evening and tomorrow preparing for our departure. I'll be back in touch before then. Good luck."

I unlocked the door and slid it open as the crew lined up behind me to go on their way. But Milton stepped inside and immediately closed the door behind, keying the lock once again.

"I was hoping you ladies and gentlemen would remain for a moment." Milton told everyone. "Please be seated. I'll be a moment while I get the senior officers not present on the comm."

Everyone sat back in their places around the room. I remained standing at Milton's side, watching him as I tried to figure out what this was about. It took less than a minute for the senior officers to connect over the comm.

"Attention everyone," Milton began. "Pursuant to regulations, as the senior surviving member of the United Nations Space Command, and pending the approval of the executive council, which in this case exists of members of the senior officers of the UNSC Freedom, I would like to change the designation of the Freedom's shuttle, known unofficially as Thumper, to that of a fully independent entity, for the purposes of separating the crew of the shuttle from the crew of the Freedom for the purposes of command. I do so to free the UNSC Thumper from all regulations, rules, procedures and orders that exist specific to the Freedom, and that may constrain it from its mission. This will allow the UNSC Thumper all rights and privileges of an interstellar ship, under the general rules of the United Nations Space Command."

So he was making the Thumper a separate distinct entity for… what reason, exactly? It wasn't like it would change a lot. Though it was fitting, considering the Thumper would be continuing on alone, and had it not been separated legally from the Freedom then any command decision the crew made would forever be labelled as temporary, awaiting approval from Captain Nelson. It may really only be a matter of point of view, but it would make the new crew their own unit, which may make them more united behind the new leader.

“Let the record reflect that I, as captain of the Freedom, approve of this change in designation, and would strongly encourage each of the senior officers to do so as well, with the stipulation that the vessel be commanded by the individual immediately chosen by aforementioned council. Please vote.”

“Sounds good.” Bao’s voice came.

“My vote is for.” Liam said.

“A very wonderful idea, young man.” Mark said in agreement.

“Yes.” Sally added, though she sounded neither enthusiastic nor happy about this.

It made sense, I thought. Not completely necessary, but it made sense. And for some reason Milton was staring at me, giving me the look he gets when he is expecting something from me.

“Oh, uh, I concur.” I said, nodding. I didn’t usually get to vote as a senior officer. That was the first time.

“By unanimous vote the shuttle is newly christened the UNSC Thumper. I further propose we name Commander Calliope Eun-ji Monroe as the commanding officer of the Thumper, elevating her to status of senior fleet captain with all rights and privileges due that office. Please–”

“Milton, no.” I said.

“Vote.” he said. “My vote is in the affirmative.”

“Yes!” Bao shouted out.

“The dear girl will make a tremendous captain.” Mark said. “I vote yes.”

“Yes.” Liam and Sally both said, though again Sally didn’t sound thrilled with it.

“Then by a unanimous vote, with the recusal of Miss Monroe because of conflict for the vote, I appoint Calliope Monroe as captain of the interstellar exploration vessel, the UNSC Thumper. Congratulations *Captain* Monroe.”

I really wasn’t sure what to think about that. I wanted to be captain almost my entire life. Since my parents died. But not like that. And not in light of events that had taken place.

“Milton,”

“Captain Monroe?” he said.

I really liked the sound of that. And I didn’t. It wasn’t right.

“May I speak with you for a moment, sir?”

“Certainly, Captain.” he told me. “My quarters in ten minutes, if you please.”

When Milton left, several of the others followed. A few stayed behind to congratulate me, and Anna managed to not only squeeze me in a bear hug that threatened to break my ribs, but practically suffocated me in the longest and most intense kiss I had ever experienced.

“I love you.” I mumbled. I hadn’t actually meant to say it, but it felt right.

“I know.” she said, smiling.

“You do? I love you.” I said aloud this time. It was easier. I liked the sound of it. “How long have you known?” I asked. I was surprised, because *I* hadn’t really known until then.

“I can’t say for sure. I think I knew about two or three days ago. I was just thinking about it, and I was like ‘that girl loves me’. It kind of shook me, but I was pretty sure.”

“Oh.”

And that’s when I realized she wasn’t saying it back. I didn’t know if that meant she didn’t feel the same, or maybe just wasn’t comfortable expressing herself like that. But she had been so good about telling me she liked me.

“Have a good conversation with Captain Nelson, Captain Monroe.” she told me.

“Yeah, uh, thanks.”

I stepped slowly onto the bridge, Anna following me. I wasn’t sure where she was going from there, maybe back to our quarters and maybe back to whatever duty Bao had her on. As I stepped off the bridge, into the passage, she put her hand on my shoulder and turned me to face her.

“It’s killing you, isn’t it?” she asked, smiling.

“What is?” I asked.

“Don’t play dumb, it doesn’t suit you.” she said. She gave me a quick kiss. “Silly girl.”

I made my way down the passage, amid the sobbing passengers and crew who had made their way close to the bridge for whatever their reasons, to Milton’s quarters. He was actually standing

in the passage when I got there, consoling an older woman who was shaking and crying so hard she was having difficulty breathing.

"Luella, I have to go inside and talk to Miss Monroe now." he told her tenderly, trying to hand her off to another man. "Luella, we're trying to figure out a way to give a handful of young people a fighting chance at surviving. I need to go make plans with Captain Monroe now."

Luella looked over to me and took a moment to focus. She gave a small, sad smile, then nodded as she pulled away from Milton.

"Have a blessed day, Miss Monroe." she told me.

I followed Milton into his quarters and took a seat. I missed the place. It hadn't been that long since I had moved out, but it oddly already didn't feel like home to me.

"You can't just name me as captain of the Thumper." I told him.

"I can with senior staff approval."

"But Milton," I whined.

He turned his back on me and poured some coffee from a carafe on the counter between the living area and small kitchenette his quarters had. He reached for a second mug.

"I don't like coffee." I reminded him.

"Yes, I know." he said. He pulled a packet of powdered hot chocolate from the cabinet. "Now, why don't you tell me what you're so fired up about, Captain."

"I'm not a captain!" I shouted.

And that was when I completely broke down. I cried and blubbered incomprehensibly for about ten minutes, I'd guess. By the time I had calmed down enough to make any sense, the hot chocolate that he had just made was barely lukewarm and he was holding me like he would when I was small, consoling me. Just like he had Luella.

"I let everyone down." I said, sniffling. "It was my fault. I knew there was something coming, and I was so busy with being in charge of the training and the away mission, and… and… and, um, thinking about… about–"

"Miss Wilson?" he asked.

"The first chance I have to make a difference, to save lives, to *not* let something happen like happened to Mom and Dad, and I let the whole human race die."

"That's a load of mush, Callie." he said. "You think you should be responsible for saving everyone from a disaster that was completely unforeseeable?"

"*I* should have seen it!"

"Callie,"

"It was right there!"

"What was there, Callie?" he asked, intentionally calming his voice.

"Right on the scan, Milton. It was… whatever it was that hit us."

"And what was that? I didn't see anything on the scans."

"There wasn't anything."

"Exactly!" He said, actually smiling. "That is my point."

"I should have known that it meant something was there, Milton."

"Callie–"

"*I* should have known."

He made his way back to the coffee pot and topped off his mug. He took a sip and paced across the room.

"Milton, I just… I let them down."

"The only way you could ever let anyone down is by not trying." he told me. "Callie, I spent a long time staring at those scans. All of our navigation and instrumentation officers spent a lot of time on it. None of us caught it."

"Well I should have."

"Maybe. And maybe one of us should have. It's too late for that. You can't be hung up on should haves. Especially when you're holding yourself to a higher standard than anyone else. Just because you catch a lot more than anyone else does, it doesn't mean you can be expected to see everything before it happens. You're not psychic, Callie."

"Obviously."

"But you are the most insightful person I've ever known. You do see more than most. You don't panic in the face of tragedy. You may very well be the only person who could have led that mission to the Gale who would have been able to bring back the shuttle intact. *You* saved those lives."

"No, I just–"

"And that is why you must lead this mission."

I had to lead the mission because I didn't panic when things got bad? Neither did Bao. Neither did a lot of other people. That wasn't good enough for me. And I think he saw that.

"Who else are you going to trust to save humanity?" he asked me.

"Bao."

"She already declined, remember."

"Maybe she'll change her mind." I said, hope filling my voice.

"No. Callie, this is your chance to make the right calls. To save people. To prevent the kind of tragedies that cost your parents their lives."

That was true. He knew that would get me. It was really not a fair argument to make to me, but it was the one that would do it. It was the one that *did* do it.

"Okay." I mumbled.

"You'll do it then?" he asked.

"I had this plan," I said, forcing a laugh out. "I was going to refuse at the last minute. I was going to get everyone ready to go, then send someone else in my place at the last second."

"And you aren't now, I assume?" he asked. "I hope."

"No. I'm going."

## Chapter Twelve

I managed to sleep an hour. It took an overdose of Amblipen to knock me out, but I needed it. Especially without Anna there. She spent the night with her parents. I couldn't exactly argue, it would be the last day she ever saw them.

Breakfast was a challenge. The cafeteria was only serving whatever they could scrounge from the refrigerators, since we had shut down the kitchen. Even then it was packed full of people eating cake and pie. No point eating healthy when you were going to die before the consequences of poor eating kicked in.

I wound up in Patronie's. A sandwich shop. I had a cheese sandwich and some apple juice. Not exactly my typical breakfast, but you take what you can get.

I was nearly finished up when Anna came in. I couldn't help it, I felt myself lighting up in her presence. But she didn't have the same reaction, and that confused me.

"Good morning." I said.

"Good morning." she said, taking a seat. "People are being weird."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I mean, ya know, other than the panic because everyone is dying?"

"Somehow the neighbors heard I was going on the shuttle and they all want to talk to me. Some want to congratulate me, some seem angry with me, I just can't figure it all out."

"I guess it makes sense that people would be acting differently toward you. Some are jealous, some are hopeful."

"They have no need to be jealous of *me*." she said, sighing dramatically. "Can we go somewhere else and talk?"

The look on her face and the way she kept looking away from me like she was nervous was starting to worry me. And now she wanted to talk to me privately. While that could be a good thing–or an

amazing thing–the way she was acting made me think it wouldn't turn out that way.

"Let's go back to my quarters." I told her.
"Yeah, let's go to your quarters."

She acted kind of odd when I reached for her hand in the passage, pulling her hand back and looking away.

"Captain Monroe!" some woman shouted.

The next thing I knew I had twenty people crowded around me, all begging to go along, begging me to choose them instead.

"Take my son." one woman cried out. "He's just four, he doesn't deserve to die. Please don't leave him to die. He'll only take a small space, he doesn't eat much."
"Take my little girl." a man added to that plea. "She's twelve, she could be a lot of help. And she's smart! Please!"

And others continued on like this for a full three minutes. At some point the crowd had grown, and I now had at least fifty people begging to go along, and more heartbreaking, asking me to take their children.

Images swam through my mind–images of the poor children I had seen on the Gale during my stay. There was a little girl there studying schematics on her tablet while she ate. She must have been all of seven, and she was so deep in her study that I don't think she even realized I had looked over her shoulder. She could have been me. And I saw her die.

I saw all of them die.

And I imagined how each of the children these people were begging for would die in the coming days. Some would pass out early from built up gasses in the air, and some would probably live past that and be awake when they got to witness the adults around them, their parents, pass out. Those poor children would be alone as they watched the adults beginning the slow process of dying from asphyxiation. And they'd know what was in store for them, as well.

What a horrible nightmare.

There was nothing I could do for them, though. Even if I refused to go, it wouldn't be in the best interests of the species to send a child in my place. They would be a drag on the crew at first, and the twelve people who went would all be necessary if the human race were going to survive. I couldn't let my emotions rule or I'd send a ship full of kids out and they'd all die within days, if not sooner. I couldn't do that.

Anna and I reached my quarters and were inside, and I sealed the rest of the world out as I slid the door shut. It wasn't until that moment I realized how horribly loud it had been in the passage with all the shouting for me to choose them or take their family.

And how incredibly quiet it was in my quarters.

"Okay," I said, taking a seat beside her on the sofa. "I'm here."

"Mom and Dad exploded on me last night."

"Exploded? As in they were angry?"

"Yes, Callie, they were angry!" she said, giving me an exasperated look. "Just what else could I mean by 'exploded on me'?"

"Sorry, I just–"

"No," she said, pausing for a loud sigh. "*I'm* sorry. I'm just in a bad mood, I shouldn't take it out on you."

"I understand. It's going to be hard to leave everyone and–"

"I'm not going." she said.

That was exactly what I feared she'd tell me.

And it still struck me like the backside of a stinball racket.

For a long moment I couldn't breathe.

Things slowed to a crawl and my mind went fuzzy.

I stared at the display on the wall, watching as the minutes ticked over, noticing the smudges across the screen. I'd have to clean that later, I thought. I could feel all the muscles in my body tensing, straining against themselves and each other. The air had a whiff of odor that I couldn't recognize in it, and some voice in the back of my head was telling me to shoot a memo off to Bao that she needed to check into that.

Yes, the filters needed changed.

And I needed to clean the display screen.

I'd need to talk to Milton to make sure we could get a security person assigned to every member of the away team, too. He had said he would, but hadn't yet. It was important now that we not have any delays.

And Anna wasn't going.

"What, uh, do you mean?" I asked her.

It couldn't have been over a minute–less in fact, because I had been watching the time on the display. Still, it seemed like it had been hours since she destroyed me inside.

"Exactly what I said." she said.

I hadn't realized I was crying until I saw that she was as well. I reached up and wiped at her tears.

"Your parents?" I asked.

"Yeah," she nodded and sniffled. "They just… I can't go knowing that they hate me."

"And so you stay here and die?" I asked. I felt like she was cutting me open and ripping out my insides. "You know what's coming for everyone who stays behind."

"I can't let them die angry at me."

"Well maybe if I talk to them–"

"That would not be a good idea." she said, forcing out a very sad sounding laugh. "They kinda hate you right now."

I hadn't expected it. And I kind of did. I wasn't even sure why they would hate me, but I could tell from their attitudes that they were at the very least really unhappy with me lately.

"What, um, are they angry about?" I asked her, already knowing but needing to hear it.

"Our relationship, Callie. My father is–"

"Psycho?"

"He doesn't like that I'm gay. Neither does Mom."

"But they won't be going with us, Anna. We can go, and we can be together, and–"

"I'm sorry."

I knew it was hard on her, I could tell, but it didn't seem fair. She would stay here and die because her parents were homophobic bigots, and they would rather their daughter die than let her be in love with another girl.

"But Anna, I just–"
"I'm really sorry."
"Really?" I asked. "Well just go then!"
"Ca–"
"You choose them over me?!"
"It's not that, it's–"
"It is that!" I shouted. "You said you love me, and then… you just…what, choose to die?."
"Callie, please try to–"
"What about me? What about how *I* feel? I don't want you to die, I love you."
"Wha–"
"Doesn't what I think matter?"
"I just–"
"Do *I* even matter to you?" I asked, tears making my words come out jumbled?"
"Of course you–"
"You know what? Just go then!"
"Cal–"
"Get out!" I shouted.

Her face hardened then. I had upset her, which I guess was really unfair of me. But at that moment I just wanted her to go away.

"I'm sorry." She mumbled, as she made her way to the door.

Life doesn't give us do-overs, though.

And so she left my quarters, and I kicked my sofa hard enough that I actually worried I had broken my foot.

And I remembered she actually *hadn't* said she loved me.

"I don't need her!" I shouted to myself. "I don't need her." I repeated, softly this time.

It didn't work. I needed her to survive. I still knew that Milton was right, I *had* to lead the Thumper mission if I wanted to give humanity the best chance to continue on. Just at that moment,

though, I really didn't care one way or the other if humanity endured. Mostly I wanted Anna's parents to get sucked out an airlock.

But in a surprisingly short amount of time I worked out what needed to be done. I would go. I would go, and I'd do my best to put Anna and all the hurt and betrayal I was feeling behind me long enough to ensure that the crew–my crew–would land safely and set up a camp, assuming the air was remotely breathable.

And then I'd go off somewhere and kill myself.

With that plan in place in my head, I continued on with the necessary duties I needed to accomplish to provide the best possible chance for us to launch that day.

I did take a moment away to compose a brief and scathing message to both Sally and Jonathan Wilson, letting them know what I thought of them, letting them know they sentenced their daughter to die, and letting them know how badly I'd like to relocate certain appendages to their rectal region. In profane details.

I sent a group message to my crew, including Milica Vasilyev, the alternate who would fill Anna's spot on the Thumper. I let them all know the things I needed from them that day, and reminded them that they were to only bring one small bag of personal items, as there was a strict limit to weight on the Thumper if we were going to make it.

Which made me wonder about Milica. She was quite a bit larger than Anna, and I hadn't considered that when selecting her as an alternate. I should have, I realized, but it was too late to choose a different alternate. Not to mention how hard it would be to tell someone who thought they would go and have a chance to live that no, instead they were going to stay there and die because they weighed too much.

I checked their records, including the medical records that I had access to because of my ability to access Mark's records without his or the patient's express permission. I hadn't actually ever looked at them, I had valued their privacy too much, but I didn't have time to worry about it anymore.

Milica was nearly twenty kilograms heavier than Anna. Instead of fifty she weighed in at near seventy. That was a lot when it came to

our limits.

I sent off a quick note to Bao:

*Bao, Milica will be going instead of Anna. She's 20kg heavier, is that going to be a problem? I can reduce the personal gear allotment from 10kg to 8 if necessary.*

Her reply came only a moment later:

*It's close, but I think we'll squeak by with that additional weight. Anna isn't going? Bleeding hemorrhoids, why? You ok?*

*I'm okay.* I replied.

That was all I was going to tell her right then. I was most certainly, absolutely, unequivocally *not okay.* But I would continue my part of the mission. I had no choice, really.

And so I did. I went over the plans, as I knew them, and looked over every detail I could, down to and including the list of materials and equipment we would be taking along. Mark had won out in his argument with Liam, and we would be taking along a small refrigerator to keep a certain amount of medications that required cooling.

Liam thought an additional life support system, including portable air purifiers, would be a better use of the weight. They weighed in at nearly the same amount, but it seemed better to risk our lives on well known life support on the shuttle, plus the built-in backups, and have the necessary medication along in case someone got very ill. We couldn't lose even one person or it could prove detrimental. If a case came up where the second backup life support was needed it would probably mean at least one crewmember had died, anyway. Or that we all would, whether it was there or not.

And I went about the day, doing things like that, trying my very best not to let my heartbreak stop me.

Around sixteen hundred my door buzzed. Thinking it would be Anna, I hurried to it, excited and hopeful. I just knew that she had changed her mind, that she really did love me like I did her and wanted to go with me, no matter what her parents said.

But when it slid open it was Milton, flanked by two security officers.

"May I come in, Captain?" he asked.

"Uh, yes, sure." I told him, my heart breaking anew.

"If you have time," he said, raising the bag he was holding up. "I brought dinner."

"Oh. Yes, absolutely. I'm famished."

The security guards stayed in the passage, and Milton and I sat on my sofa as he picked salad, some very appealing looking ramen, and cake from his bag.

"Interesting combination." I noted.

"Yes, well, it's what I could do and I knew you liked all of this."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Oh, and one more thing," he said, reaching up and removing his captain insignia. "I realized that I never got you any insignia after promoting you."

"Milton, you don't need to–"

"I'd be honored if you'd wear these."

I actually teared up at that. It was one of the most touching moments I had ever experienced with him. He once told me how much those stars meant to him, how his father had actually had them made long before Milton had ever been made captain, knowing that he would one day and wanting to be the one to present the stars to him.

And here Milton was, presenting them to me.

I bent toward him when he motioned me over, and he pinned the insignia onto the shoulders of the uniform I wore. And then he pulled me into a hug and I cried.

"I'm going to miss you, Milton." I told him. "I love you."

"I'm not going to miss you at all, Callie." he said, laughing. "At least not for long. And I love you too."

"Anna isn't going!" I said, not able to stop myself. "Her parents won't let her."

He seemed a little confused by my sudden outburst. It seemed like it took him a moment to realize the depth of the problem.

"I think I'll have a talk with Commander Wilson." he said. He started to rise.

"It won't do any good. Anna won't go if her parents are mad at her."

"I'm sorry." he said, lowering himself back to his seat. "Callie, I know you don't believe this now, but there will be–"

"Before you tell me there will be someone else just remember that there will be exactly twelve of us going, so I pretty much know there will never be anyone else."

He wrapped his arms around me and let me cry for some time before he pulled back from me. He smiled a sad smile.

"If you decide not to go–"

"How can I not?!" I asked. "After everything you said to me… I mean… And I just need to go to make certain they have the best chance to survive. I can't stay here."

"You're sure?"

"I'm not sure, Milton! I just… why does this happen?"

But I knew why it was happening. I knew. It was all because I had messed up. I had allowed everyone to die. If I had seen things in time then we wouldn't be in that position. Anna and I would have had weeks or months together ahead of us, and it was killing me.

I was the reason Anna was going to die.

"If you'll excuse me, Captain," I said, wiping at my eyes and struggling to gain control of myself. "I have preparations to make."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"There will be a meeting for anyone wanting to say their last goodbyes in the executive conference room around seventeen hundred. If you have time, could you make an appearance?"

"Yes, of course."

"See you then."

I didn't have anyone else I really wanted to say goodbye to, but it would be important for my crew. And they were the whole reason I was going to go. The minute Milton made them *my* crew I had to go. They would need me.

After Milton left I reviewed the cargo list for the Thumper. I

even took the time to go to give an eyeball inventory of what I could see in the cargo hold, checking to see if it looked like everything was there that had been certified as having been loaded.

Every box looked like Anna to me. Or rather, the lack of Anna. The place where Anna would be? No, more like I could see in everything how Anna would never use it. She would never be there to take the medications that were onboard. She would never use the tent. Never eat the food. She would never wear the extra boots, or breathe from the oxygen canisters. She wasn't going.

"You okay, kiddo?" I heard Bao ask.

I had been standing in the corner of the Thumper's cargo hold staring into the pile of things that *would be* going along. Thinking of Anna, of course.

"Captain?"

"Yes. Fine, Bao." I said. Then something occurred to me. "I guess I'll be needing a first officer, if you're interested."

"There isn't anyone else you'd rather name as first, kiddo? Maybe one Miss Wilson?"

"I told you she isn't going."

"Well, to be honest, Captain, I hoped that you would manage to change her mind by now."

"Nope."

"Aren't you going to even try?"

Try! Didn't she think I had tried to change Anna's mind already?! Didn't she know me at all?

"Are there any issues that will keep us from launching, Commander?" I asked her.

"Nothing relating to the ship, Captain."

"The booster?"

"It's attached and wired in as well as I can make it on short notice with the equipment and help I have. I think it'll hold. I wish we had another week for me to come up with a better design, but this was quick and easy. Simplest design in the book. It should work."

"I hope so."

"It will."

Well, I was at least somewhat hopeful, since she seemed confident. I trusted Bao. Plus, if it all went wrong it wouldn't really

matter much at that point. All we could do was our best. I wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of dying, but if there was any kind of justice in the universe I'd get to see Anna and my parents again if I died quickly, at least.

I couldn't just let it go. I couldn't. I had to make one more push to get Anna to come. But I already knew she wasn't going to change her mind. Anna has always been a stubborn girl.

With my security officer in tow, I made my way down the passageway. We had to stop at one point to break up a fight between a group from NOCO and some others. All I know is the NOCO people kept shouting that we should all repent, and that the others had damned us all.

Whatever.

When the door to their quarters opened, Sally stood before me. She stared at me, both pain and anger in her eyes.

"Commander." she said, dipping her head.

"Captain." I reminded her, though it was a little uncomfortable doing so.

"Anna is not here at the moment. She is with her father at the church."

"I didn't come to talk to her. I hoped I could have a moment with you."

"Come in."

She pretended to be pleasant as she stepped aside and waved me in. I left the security officer in the passage and went inside, taking a seat in their living area.

"What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Anna refuses to go." I said. "I'm assuming you know this?"

"Yes, I know. I'm very proud of her for making the right decision."

"At the risk of sounding… insulting, Commander, are you insane?"

"Cap–"

"She *wants* to go! She wants to live. You should want that for her. You are her mother."

"I am also a realist, Callie. Your mission is going to fail. She is going to die, anyway, and I want her to be here with me when it

happens."

"That's idiotic, and you know it!" I shouted at her. "This is not because you think our mission will fail. And don't be so sure that it will, anyway." Though I agreed that it was most likely to. "This isn't about that at all."

"Oh really? And what, *pray tell*, is it about, do you think?"

"You know what it's about."

"No. Please tell me, since you are all knowing, little girl."

She looked at me as if I were being a silly little teenager. Maybe I was. Maybe I was being as blind as she was, and just wanted Anna to be with me when it all ended. But I didn't want her to die without the slim chance that our mission would give her.

"It's because of me. Of her and me being together, specifically." I explained.

"It's immoral!"

"It's not."

"The bible specifically says–"

"That's your husband talking." I told her. "And it's completely beside the point. Even if she is doing something immoral, wouldn't you still want her to have chance to live."

"You think you know so much, don't you? Well you don't. Now please go. They will be back soon and I want to have a nice quiet evening with my family."

"Sal–"

"Please."

There was nothing more I could do. I stood and made my way to the door. She was an unbudging boulder, and I was wasting my time.

"Callie," she said, then waited for me to turn back to her. "I hope your mission is a success."

"Thank you."

"Maybe… I'll try to see if we can come say goodbye before you go."

"Thank you." I said, nodding.

"I won't make promises, but I'll try."

As I headed up the passageway there was a very loud squelching sound over the shipwide comm, followed by Milton asking all security personnel to report to the bridge. My security dispatch looked at me, and with a nod of approval from me, he took off at full

run that direction. I followed closely behind.

What we found when we got there was nothing short of a massacre. A group, some NOCO, some not, had tried to take over the ship. They had managed to subdue the crewmembers who were manning the bridge at the time, but security had gotten there as they tried to turn the ship toward the star of this system. There were knives, clubs, even a couple of guns–which were strictly prohibited– littered about the deck.

Among the debris of the scuffle were eleven dead bodies, some riddled with bullet holes, some with large gashes, and some with burn marks that would have been left behind by the lethal setting on the security stun guns.

There were several bloodied security officers leaning against walls or laying on the floor. I hurried to the nearest one and grabbed onto his side, putting pressure on the knife wound.

"Mark, this is Callie," I yelled into the comm on my tablet. "Send a team to the bridge immediately!"

"Already on their way, hon." his voice shot back. "You get out of there and find a safe place."

"Don't worry about me, Mark. Just get here and help these– "

"I've got her taken care of." Milton's voice interrupted.

I looked up as he took my arm in his hand and yanked me away from the wounded security officer. He dragged me away as I struggled.

"Milton!"

"You're not safe here." he said, not looking at me.

"It's fine now, I–"

"It's not fine, there may be more attacks." he barked.

I let him drag me down the passage, security officers leading the way, to his quarters. Once inside he shoved me down into a chair.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his eyes darting all over me, landing on my blood covered hand.

"It's not mine." I told him.

"Dear God, I thought you were hurt!" he said. "You're okay, Callie?"

"Fine."

"I never thought it would get this bad." he said, pacing. "I never thought people would turn to savagery. This is madness."

"They're scared." I said inanely. "Of course."

"Scared enough to destroy the whole ship and everyone on it?" he asked. "That's madness. Those people think if they are going to die then everyone else should go with them."

"Mil–"

"And they're willing to finish off the human race! They know your crew is the last chance humankind has."

They were going to kill us all. That's what he told me, that they wanted to kill all of us–me, Kre, Bao… Anna. And that made me angry. *Very* angry.

It wasn't enough that they would destroy each other, not enough to destroy the ship, not enough to kill my crew and humanity's last chance, they wanted to kill Anna.

I wasn't going to let that happen.

"I want a full security team on Anna." I said. "And my team, of course." I added, not wanting to sound as silly as I felt. Anna would die anyway, my team needed to live if humanity was going to continue. "And I especially want everyone at the going away meeting tonight to be patted down and scanned as they enter."

"Yes, of course. Good idea."

Milton sat next to me and watched me for a long time. I wasn't sure what to say to him. It occurred to me then, probably for the first time, that I was no longer his underling, that we were actually equals at that moment. Of course I knew that wasn't true, really, but as far as rank was concerned, and as far as responsibilities were concerned, it was true. And then I noticed how watery his eyes were looking.

"I thought they had gotten to you." he said. He smiled, despite the wet eyes. "When I first saw you on the bridge, I did."

"I'm doing fine." I told him.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning in close to me. "I sound like a ninny, blathering on about how I was so worried about you. I'm like my aunt Charlotte always was. Always complaining that the 'younguns' were getting into things that were way too dangerous."

"It's okay, Milton. I'm okay."

"I know." he said, mouth widening in a grin. "I know."

After a while with Milton it became clear to me that he was having some separation issues. He wanted me to go, wanted me to live on and to save the human race. He believed in me, was sure I was the best chance the mission had to succeed. And yet, almost like a father, he wanted nothing more than to wrap me up and protect me. He wanted to keep me there with him and do whatever he could to save my life himself. He didn't want to trust me to myself and my crew, he wanted to be the one to protect me.

It made me understand Sally Wilson a little bit, I suppose. Or even Jonathan. Though *he* was very negative and didn't come across as just wanting to save his daughter. But Sally might be.

I couldn't think about that, though. She was keeping Anna from me. Taking my world away.

I couldn't dwell on that, though. Instead, I called all my crew to come to the executive conference room. It seemed safer to just get this thing started. And a quick look at the clock confirmed that it was nearly time, anyway.

People trickled in to the conference room in twos and threes. There were occasionally loud voices in the passage, but security would take care of it quickly, and we had no further instances of violence.

It pained me to see family members hugging and crying with their children. Colton's parents were nearly inconsolable. They were hugging him so hard that it was visibly hurting him. I wanted to badly to tell them something to make them feel better, but nothing came to mind.

"Part of me just wants to get this over with, Captain." Kre said.
"Me too." I told her.

Neither of us expected anyone to come to say goodbye. Sure, some people would probably swing by and wish us well, and we knew they all wanted the best for us, but they weren't going to be there specifically for us.

"Hey there, Ash." Maury Teague said.

I hadn't noticed him and Josef Alonso coming through security. They were both teary eyed, and Alonso didn't even manage to get his greeting out, just grabbed onto Kre and cried.

"I knew you'd be captain one day." Ensign Teague said to me.

"I appreciate you saying so, Ensign."

"You take care of our girl here, okay?" Alonso asked, sniffling over at me.

"I think Ashley is able to take care of herself, Mister Alonso." I said. "Besides, I may need her to take care of me instead."

"Couldn't ask for anyone more capable, Captain." Teague said.

I stepped aside to let the three of them have their moment. They all had been together as a group longer than I had been with them, by far. I had only worked with them a few times when I began working night shift, and that was just before everything went crazy.

I saw Bao chatting with a couple of members from her department. They were laughing about something, so I was glad to see that. It was good for them to have a few lighthearted moments near the end like that.

Ensign Debartolo's parents seemed to be close with Colton's parents. They were all standing together, hugging each other, all of them hugging not only their own son, but the other couple's son as well. I never knew they were close. I thought maybe it was good that I chose both Colton and Alvin, maybe that scene meant they would each have a close friend along on the trip.

And that thought settled into my mind and made me think about myself again. No Anna. No close friends at all. I had never really been close to anyone, though. Even as a child, I fit in better with the adults than with people my age. I was way too busy learning about the ship and everything that made it work, even before my parents died. Sometimes I wished I had just been a regular child, not the precocious loner I had been when I was small.

Time was winding down. Milton had come to me and talked for a while, but he needed to make his rounds of the room to say goodbye to everyone else. He promised me he would be back to talk to me a little while later.

And then I was alone. Watching everyone else enjoy a few last moments together was good, I guess. I got to see people saying their goodbyes, and it made me feel good that I had at least helped create that moment for them. If I hadn't done the things I had done, some of those people would not have been there to say goodbye.

If I hadn't screwed up none of them would be dying soon after that night anyway, though.

I saw Sally Wilson then. I watched her talking to the security personnel, saw her waiting for her bag to be searched. I watched as she entered, without Anna, and walked over to Milica Vasilyev, who was sitting with her sister and young niece. Sally took a seat at the table and her and Milica leaned toward each other, deep in discussion.

I hated her. And I didn't. Part of me wanted to go over to them and demand that she either leave or tell me what she was doing speaking to *my* crewmember without my permission. And a part of me knew my crewmember could tell her to get lost if she wanted to. Otherwise, I needed to respect boundaries and let my crewmember visit with anyone she wanted during her last few minutes on Freedom.

The world dissolved.

Anna was stepping past security. Her golden hair was messy, brushed back and held away from her face with clips. Her face was makeup free and red from crying. There was a smallness to her that belied her height.

I wondered if my mind was playing tricks on me, if her being there was all in my imagination. And as she moved toward me, her eyes flickering to mine, then down at the deck, I saw how broken she really was.

As broken as I was.

The collar on the shirt she wore stuck up at odd angles, the left higher than the right. It was completely unlike her to look the mess she did that night. She had misbuttoned the shirt, off by one button, and it made her look a little on the crazy side. Even her shoes were unlaced.

She stumbled halfway across the room, and I feared that she would fall. But she righted herself and paused, taking a moment to wipe at her eyes and nose with a tissue.

A part of me was stuck on the fact that she was there in such a state. Even her pants looked like they didn't fit quite right, like maybe

they were a pair she should have recycled a year or two before. She had on earrings, but even those didn't match each other. She was a mess.

Not half the mess I felt like inside.

I wanted so badly for her to come. Now that she was there, I couldn't bring myself to go to her. And a part of me wished she hadn't come at all. It was only going to make it harder to leave her.

"I'm not going to say the g word." she mumbled to me.

"What word is that?" I asked her.

"You know, *that* one. The final one. It's not happening, Callie Monroe. I won't say anything like that. Not ever. Not to you."

"I'll miss you." I said.

"I know." she said.

We collapsed into a heap in some chairs and sobbed openly against each other. I knew, deep down, that it was unseemly for a captain, that I shouldn't be letting my crew see me that way. It would undermine authority. I just didn't care right then.

"I can't go without you." I whispered in her ear.

"You have to, Callie. I need you to go on so that I go on."

"But you won't go on, Anna, you'll die in this ship."

"But I'll go on in you." she said. "Won't I?"

"Yes," I said, nodding against her. "Always."

Until the day I day, whether that day was today or a week from now, she would always be a part of me. She would always be in my heart.

"Do you believe in heaven, Callie?" she asked. "Do you believe there is a place we go when we're done with this world?"

"I'd like to." I told her.

"Good." She sat back from me and wiped her face before looking directly in my eyes. "I'll see your parents soon, then. I'll say hi for you."

"Anna,"

"And I'll be waiting there with them to see you. No worries. The time there will pass quickly, and I'll be with you again."

"I love you." I told her.

"And when I see you there," she said, looking down at the

deck. “Maybe I’ll be able to tell you what I should have told you by now.”

“A–”

I stopped as Milica and Sally stepped up beside us. I turned to look up at them, and Anna saw me turn and did the same.

“May I have a moment of your time, Captain Monroe?” Sally asked. Her eyes were watery as well. “Without Anna, if possible.”

“This is the last chance I’m ever going to have to talk to her and you can’t even let us have this?!” Anna snapped at her.

“I won’t be long, Anna. I promise you will have more time to talk.”

“Just a couple of minutes.” I said.

Anna was not happy, but she went over to Bao to say goodbye to her. Sally took the seat Anna had been sitting in, and Milica remained standing.

“I was wrong.” Sally said.

“About what?”

“Anna. She… she needs to go. I need her to go.”

“What did you say?” I asked. I felt fresh tears welling. “You’re letting her go?”

“I want her to. And seeing her with you makes it all the more obvious that she needs to be with you.”

Sally closed her eyes and rubbed at them. She shook her head and swore under her breath.

“I don’t think it’s right.” she said. “I still don’t. And Jonathan was practically soiling himself when I suggested it. But he loves her, and he wants her to live too. Even if it means letting you two go about your unnatural relationship.”

I wanted to jump up and do handwheels, or cartstands, or whatever it is they always do in those really old movies from the twenty first century. Anna was going! I was going to get to have her with me!

But then reality hit me. I couldn’t take her. There wasn’t room. I couldn’t make someone else give up their spot for her, no matter how much I loved Anna. It was not right and not fair to even consider. Plus, it would be a good way to sow revolt among the crew. They

would be angry that I forced someone off for Anna and not for their family or friends.

So I made the only decision I could at the time.

I needed to save Anna, no matter what.

“You won’t need to worry about our relationship.” I told Sally. “Anna will be taking my spot.”

“She won’t go without you.” Sally said, immediately sounding irritated. “That doesn’t even make sense. This mission needs you. You’re the captain.”

“There simply isn’t room for both of us. I choose her. End of story.”

“Not so much.” Milica told me.

## Chapter Thirteen

How it would work, as Sally explained, is that Milica would give up her seat so that Anna could go along. Of course that was only if I would agree to also take Milica's four year old niece, Svetlana Pasternak.

"We can't take another person." I explained to them. "And it isn't right for you to give up your place, Milica. I'll stay. Anna can go, but I will stay here."

"She isn't going without you." Sally told me again. "She made her feelings for you abundantly clear to Jonathan and me earlier today."

"I weigh more than Anna Wilson and Svetlana combined, Captain." Milica explained. "You can make this work."

"We can't." I said, shaking my head. "There aren't even enough seats."

"Make Sveta sit on the damn deck, just take her along!" Milica demanded. "Please!"

"Mi–"

"What's going on?" Anna asked, her hand landing on my shoulder.

"Good news, Anna," Sally told her, smiling. "You'll be going along."

"What?!" Anna asked. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious."

"Dad agreed to this?"

"Yes, honey, he did." Sally told her. "You get to live, Anna."

"I get to go, Callie!" she shouted, grabbing me in a hug.

"Yes," I told her. "You will go. I'm so happy, Anna. You'll get to live. You'll get to survive."

"We'll be together!"

"No, Anna, you will be taking my–"

"*My* spot." Milica said. "But you'll have to help take care of my niece, or I'm not giving up my seat."

"Absolutely!" Anna said.

I looked up at Anna and I tried to find the words to explain to her that I couldn't go along, that she'd be going without me. But Milica was right, Svetlana and Anna combined couldn't weigh as much as she did.

And I couldn't bear the possibility that Sally was right, that Anna wouldn't go without me. Because if she did not go she would die, and Anna *was not going to die*!

The biggest problem I saw was that we didn't have the seats. We didn't have the food. Maybe Anna and Svetlana combined didn't weigh any more than Milica did, but they would surely eat more than she did. That would mean that our food supply may end up inadequate.

"Bao, can I speak with you?" I shouted. To the others I said "If this is going to work, I need to talk to Bao about what we can do to strap little Sveta in."

"You're going to need this." Sally said, shoving the bag she had brought with her into Anna's arms. "Take care of yourself."

"I will." Anna said.

"Captain, please take care of my daughter."

"I promise I will do my best, Sally."

"Of course." she said, nodding. "Be happy, Anna. Your father and I love you."

Sally stood and walked away. Anna looked sickly, and I thought for a moment that she would run after her mother and decide to stay with her on the Freedom. But she didn't, she stayed by my side.

As the party wound down people got more serious. No smiles, except for the occasional sad one, marked any faces at that point. Not so much as a nervous joke, or shared smile. No, everyone was pensive. Pale. Shellshocked, as the ancient vids would say.

And it was my duty to call time on everything. We were going to have to head to the Thumper if we were going to make our target launch time, which had been pushed as far back as we could when we set it to twenty two hundred.

"I need everyone's attention, please."

Everyone stopped talking and the room was still. All eyes

landed on me, even Milton's, and I felt extremely small at that moment. It occurred to me that other than Svetlana, I was the youngest in the room. And I was in charge. Even Milton was ceding to my call for attention. I hadn't ever felt so important, in both good and bad ways, as I did right then.

"Our, uh, time here is coming to an end." I said. I blinked several times, trying to prevent the tears that were threatening. "My crew needs to head toward our ship now. I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every person in this room, and that goes for everyone on the Freedom, for all…"

I did have to pause then, I was so choked up. I sipped at a glass of water that was nearby–which I'm not sure was mine–before I was able to continue on.

"Thank you to each and every person on this ship for helping us all throughout our lives, and for being there for each of us on the Thumper crew and for all you have done for us. We wish you all nothing but the best, and please know that you will be in our prayers."

"Amen to that, Captain." Bao said.

I wanted to dissolve into the deck right then. I wanted to just change what I had said, to instead tell everyone that we were staying behind to be with our friends and families, no matter the outcome of that.

But I couldn't.

Our mission was far more important than any of us, individually or as a group. It didn't matter how badly we wanted to just curl into a ball and let the others wrap us in hugs, we had to go. There was no question.

And so we did.

I led my crew, along with a large dispatch of security officers, to the passage where we would transition to our ship.

"Captain first." Bao said, waiting at the base of the ladder.

"I think just this once I'll make an exception to that, Commander." I told her. "Go on in. I want to make sure my crew all get aboard safely."

“Yes ma’am.” she said, giving a quick salute and a smile.

Bao paused for a moment to give a smile and shake hands with Milton, who was standing next to me, then she hurried up the ladder. One by one, my crew followed her, Anna helping Svetlana because the rungs were too far apart for her to reach very well.

“Be the captain you always wanted to be, Callie.” Milton said. He bent forward and hugged me.

“I don’t want to be captain anymore.” I said softly.

“I understand the feeling, trust me.” he said, pulling back. “One last bit of advice from an old man?”

“You’re not old.”

“Never second guess yourself, Captain. Make the best decision you can at the time, then move on from it, no matter how it turns out. And don’t ever think someone else could do it better or try to think of how I would do it, you just be you and be the best you can. I have absolute faith in you, Calliope.”

“That’s more than one piece of advice.” I pointed out. “Thank you, Captain.” I said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t a better kid. Thank you for taking me in.”

“You were a wonderful kid. And it was an honor. Now go,” he said, nudging me. “I’m kicking you off my ship.”

And so I went.

I placed first one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, then raised the other foot up. I lowered it for a moment back to the deck, wanting one last time to touch my home. I was going to miss Freedom and all the people she held within her. It had been a good place to grow up, I thought.

I looked up at the open hatch to Thumper, to *my* ship. And I didn’t look back. No last looks around, no more pauses, I climbed the ladder and tried desperately not to cry. There was no more time for tears.

I stepped foot onto the Thumper, leaving my lifetime home behind me for the last time.

“Captain on deck.” Bao barked, as I moved up the ladder to the flight deck. She was going all in on it. “I’m warming up the systems, Captain Monroe. We’ll be ready in six minutes.”

“Everyone double check your belts. Where is Anna?” I asked,

noticing her missing. “And Svetlana.”

“In crew quarters.”

I hurried back to the crew quarters and keyed open the door. There was Anna and Svetlana, laying in a bunk with a pair of straps wrapped over them holding them down.

“Are you secure?” I asked.

“I think we’re all set.” Anna said.

“Are you doing okay, Svetlana?” I asked. She looked terrified.

“Aunt Milica says I have to be a good girl, Captain.” she said.

“Well,” I bent down in front of her and playfully poked her nose. “I need you to be brave now, Sveta. I need you to take care of my girlfriend, okay?” She nodded in affirmation. “Good. Is it okay if I call you Sveta?”

“Uh-huh.” she said.

“Good. Oh, and you can call me Callie, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Are you doing okay, Anna?”

“As well as can be expected.” she said. “At least I have Svetlana here to protect me.”

“Okay, so, you two stay buckled in for now. I’ll let you know when it’s safe. I have to go run one last systems check.”

I sat in the copilot chair up front for the simple reason that it was the only place I could run systems analysis directly and quickly. Everything checked out, though there were code tie-ins that I didn’t recognize that were active. The new booster.

“All set when you are, Captain.” Bao said.

“Hatch is secured and locked in.” I said, confirming aloud what I had just checked. “Kre, swap places with me.”

“Captain?” she responded, surprise in her voice.

“You’re the backup for Bao if anything goes wrong, okay?”

“Yes Captain.”

We traded seats, Kre moving into the copilot seat where I had been and me taking her seat in the back. I took a moment to adjust the belts, then nodded to Bao, who had been turned to watch.

“Captain?” Bao asked.

“Move us away from Freedom, Commander.” I said.

It was difficult to say, and weirdly difficult to even hear myself

saying. We were leaving the Freedom. Forever.

"We're detached, kiddo." Bao said. "Moving to our coordinates."

She guided the ship away, and I could feel the sensation of things moving along. Some of the others were saying prayers, or whispering last goodbyes to their families.

"Callie, come in." Milton said over the com. "Callie?"
"Here, Milton."
"I just wanted to take this last opportunity to wish you all good luck. You'll do us proud, I am certain."
"Thank you, Captain."

There was a message on my tablet at the same time as Milton was talking.

*Do not repeat this to your crew until later. Let them think we are still here as long as possible. As soon as you are outside of radio range I intend to slowly vent the oxygen until everyone onboard passes out and succumbs. I've been discussing it with Commander Tyler and Commander Wilson, as well as Dr. Burton. Mark assures me it will be relatively quick and painless. A clean and easy death compared to the possible alternative.*

"Please don't, Milton." I said over the comm. "Just give people time."
"I will take care of my crew, Callie, you take care of yours. It's for the best."
"Goodbye, Milton." I said, realizing he was right. "Best of luck."
"Goodbye Callie. Godspeed Thumper. Godspeed Captain Calliope Monroe."

Nobody else said anything for a long time. Then Bao made some comments about navigating to the correct heading before igniting the booster.

We all watched as the Freedom disappeared, growing ever smaller in the ports. Bao maneuvered us into a line facing the location we would need to be in three days, when we would enter the atmosphere of the moon.

"Running up the booster now, kiddo." Bao said. "Should I go?"

“Is everyone ready?” I asked. Nobody said anything. “It’s a go, Bao.”

“Everyone hold on.” she replied.

It took a moment, but suddenly there was a monstrous roar, so loud that my ears began hurting. The ship shook violently, and my eyes couldn’t focus because everything was moving about so wildly. I worried about damage to the ship, but I also worried that we’d all suffer from some kind of brain injury, something like a concussion, simply from the shaking. I contemplated asking the doctor about it, but suddenly there was a violent shove *backward* into the seat, as the booster kicked in at full power. And for the next seven minutes I felt my face being squished back from the force of acceleration.

And then it faded away. There were alarms and bells going off everywhere, but it did not look like anything critical was damaged.

“Jettisoning booster.” Bao said. “Damn, I was hoping to get another thirty seconds of boost.”

“Do we have enough acceleration to make it, Bao?” I asked. My face felt funny from all the pressure that had been on it.

“Running the numbers now, but–”

“I think we’ll make it.” Kre cut in. “We’ll have to adjust our vector a couple of degrees, but we should intersect the moon as scheduled.”

“Thank you, Ensign.” Bao said.

“Are we clear to move about now?” I asked Bao.

“Clear, yes. We have a couple of things we need the crew to check on. Someone needs to check the cargo below to make sure it didn’t shift. And I’d like a visual inspection of fuel and water levels, if possible, Captain. To make sure we haven’t sprung a leak.”

“Debartolo, Preston, you take the cargo. Kouri and Switzer, you’ve got fluid levels.”

“Yes Captain.” they said, mostly in unison.

“Can we shut off those alarms?” I suggested.

“I’m on it.” Kre said.

We were out of radio range already. If the Freedom’s long range radios hadn’t been destroyed during the meteoroid shower we wouldn’t have been, but we were. And I knew what that meant.

“Do we have free time now, Captain?” Chief Duval asked.

“Oh, yes.” I said. “We’ll be on six hour shifts, so everyone going on second try to relax and get a nap or down time.”

"Who's on which shifts, Captain?" Ensign Pok asked.

"Uh… good question." I said. "Give me a couple of minutes and I'll let you know."

It was one of those things I should have thought through, should have already known. But I hadn't come up with that plan yet, so I had to think on my feet.

We needed someone on the helm all the time. That meant Bao or Kre. I decided I could cover for the third shift, since I could fly the Thumper in open space without too much trouble. Other than that, all we really needed was someone to handle instruments–the long range scanners and radios. It would be nice to have an engineer, but that would mean Bao or Anna, and Bao would be piloting and wouldn't be available. Kouri and Preston would have to do for instruments. They were from Science, so they'd be able to do that much, at least.

"Commander Bao will cover first shift, which begins at midnight, along with Chief Kouri on instruments." I said. "Second will be Ensign Kre on helm, with Preston on instruments, and I will take third with Anna... er, Lieutenant Wilson."

"Who is in charge for each shift?" Shauna asked. "I mean from what I learned in school, someone should be named as OIC, right?"

"You may have a point, Shauna." I said. "But for now we'll just go by rank. I don't think it'll be an issue, anyway. We're all going to work well together, right?" I asked.

"Yes, Captain." several of my crew sounded off together.

"Excellent. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll go check on our other passengers."

I paused outside of the door to the cabin. I needed to see Anna, but I knew she had just lost her parents. Everyone aboard had lost people, but Anna was very close to her parents in some ways, and she had not left on the best of terms. To top that off, I knew there was a little girl in there who had also just lost her family, and I wasn't sure how much of that she understood.

"How are the two of you doing?" I asked them, entering the small room.

"I think we're doing okay." Anna said. She poked Svetlana in the side until the girl giggled. "Aren't we, Sveta?"

"Sto-op!" Svetlana said, still giggling.

"Everything going okay?" Anna asked.

"Yes, we're doing well."

I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think of a way to explain to Anna that there was a good chance her parents would be dead in the next few minutes. Plus, what was an appropriate way to break that news with Svetlana in the room? I didn't know.

Without her in it, I decided.

"Sveta, can I speak to Anna alone for a while?" I asked.

The girl squirmed closer to Anna, and she looked completely terrified. Apparently in the short time they had been together Anna had gained her trust.

"Go out and talk to Shauna, Svetlana. She's nice." Anna told her.

I waited for Svetlana to go. She was such a cute little girl. So shy and innocent. I hoped she'd be able to retain that, even through everything that would come.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.
"Well..." she said, then shrugged.
"I need to tell you something," I said.

And then I realized I couldn't. Not yet. I needed to let her have time to think they are still breathing and living and mourning her. I needed to give her that. Telling her that Milton planned to bring it all to a swift end so that none of them would suffer would only make *her* suffer. I couldn't do that.

"What?" she asked, after I had taken a long pause.
"Um…" I said. "I love you."
"Yeah," she said, giggling. "You said that before."
"We're going to be okay, Anna."
"I know. I trust you, Callie."
"So it's, uh, going to take about two days to get there."
"You told me that before too." She smiled her wonderful, *melt me like I'm butter* smile at me.
"Oh." I said, nodding. "Okay then. Well, you're on third shift with me. You'll be the instrumentation officer."
"Sounds good."
"I better go, um, check on everyone else."

I wanted to tell her that her parents were gone already. I wanted to be the one who let her know so I could do it gently, and so I'd get to be the one who would console her.

I couldn't hurt her like that, though. I loved her too much. I think I always had. Even when I was in denial. Even when I didn't realize it.

But did she feel the same?

I wasn't so sure. She cared about me, but did she really love me? I wasn't sure. She had never said so much.

Sally had said Anna wouldn't go unless I did, and she said Anna made her feelings clear to them. I just wish she had made them clear to me as well.

Do you know how hard it is to concentrate when everyone you know is dying a few thousand meters away?

"Anna, they may be dead already." I told her.

"Don't." she warned me. "I… I just don't want to discuss that right now. Let's talk about the future instead."

"Okay," I agreed. "We're going to land on that moon. If the air is breathable, we'll work to build a small farm or greenhouse to grow our food, as well as some extensive testing on the local flora and fauna, if there is any, for suitability for consumption."

"We'll have to have shelter." Anna said.

"Yes. Any thoughts on that?"

"We have tents, right? Maybe if there is suitable dirt we could mix some water to make a mud and use that as a binder to hold rocks together and build rock walls. The roof may be harder to come up with. Hopefully we'll come up with some way to cool the indoors."

"Actually, based on the scans we'll need to heat it." I told her. "And, um, what about our future?"

I couldn't look at her. I loved her. If she told me we didn't have a future together it would kill me. But I know everyone said she was very upset about not going with me. I thought that meant she cared about me as much as I did her, but I couldn't be sure until I heard her say it herself.

"I'm sure we'll be okay, Callie." she said.

"No, I meant–"

“I know.” she said. She smiled. “We’ll be okay.”
“Yeah,” I said. “Uh, I better go check on the rest of the crew.”

I went out into the main area and saw that many of my crew were either still, or were once again sitting in their seats, staring at each other. As if nobody had any clue what to do next.

Which was true.

I had carefully planned out our trip, but other than discussions with Bao I had never spoken of them. So I spent a little bit then describing the next couple of days to everyone.

We were to fly through the space between us and the moon for close to two days. During that time we would switch off crews every few hours, so that everyone would have a chance to rest and some time to work on what we would do when we got there. The booster had given us quite a shot of speed, and without it we would have taken over a week to get there. A week when we did not have that much oxygen aboard. So it was good that Bao was able to craft the booster, even though she never stopped her incessant complaining about how crude it was and how she had wished she were able to do a better job.

I explained to them the things I knew that we would need to know about when we got there. How to survive, which meant shelter at first, as well as heating or cooling, and ways to keep ourselves safe. Soon after that, we’d need water, then food. Some of the crew seemed to think food was the first order, but Dr. Gershawn agreed that water was by far the most important. And a way to purify it.

Giving my crew something to do seemed to lighten their spirits, surprisingly. It was like they were able to forget the horror of what we just left for the time being, and was able to concentrate on survival.

It took a while for me to build up to it, but I did. Eventually. It probably took hours, and everyone was in the middle of discussing what may be there when they land, and how best to use it if they were right.

“So everyone, I need to, um, talk to you about something.” I said.

By then Anna had come out to join the others. She was sitting with Svetlana, playing some dot game on her tablet. When she heard me say that, Anna glanced up quickly.

"Give us just a minute, Callie." Anna said. "I think we'll go back to the room to let you talk to–"

"No, you… Anna, you need to hear this too." I said. She gave a glance and touch of nod toward Svetlana. "No, her too." I said.

"Callie–"

"It's important." I told her.

She nodded and settled back, pulling Svetlana onto her lap and hugging her from behind. The rest of the crew, other than Bao at the controls and Kouri on instruments, gathered before me.

"Our families," I said.

And I couldn't continue. I couldn't. I choked up, but my crew waited patiently. I didn't see looks of judgement from them, not pity either, just patience. They understood my emotions.

"Let me." Bao said.

She was standing beside me, and she raised her hand up to put it on my shoulder. She nodded for me to sit.

"Before we left, Commander Wilson came to me to discuss Captain Nelson's plans for when we had gone." she said.

"He told you?" I asked.

"I confronted him and made him tell me." she told me.

"Told you what?" Shauna asked.

"Our families are gone now." I said.

"Shit spasms, kiddo," Bao said. "Way to break it to them easy." She turned to rest. "They weren't going to make it long. Captain Nelson and the senior staff, including Dr. Burton, made the call to sort of… put everyone to sleep so they wouldn't suffer."

"Son of a bitch." Shauna mumbled.

"That makes sense." Dr. Gershawn said. "Reduce oxygen levels. Some will pass out. Some will still be awake when they asphyxiate, I suspect,"

"Doctor," I said, giving her a warning stare.

"It would be very short and not painful." she added, not really looking all that believable as she did.

For a while everyone just sort of cried and huddled together. Eventually they seemed to spontaneously decide that they didn't want to join their families just yet, and they got back to the work of figuring out how to survive.

We were several hours into Kre's shift at the helm, and Chief Preston was on instruments. I was looking through the latest data from the moon at the time.

"You should get some sleep, Captain." Kre told me.

"I don't think I could." I told her. "Besides, I'm not sure there's even room."

I looked around, and the only people awake were me, Kre, Preston, and Colton. He was bent forward in his seat, holding his head.

"Colton, you okay?" Kre asked.

"Uh," he mumbled. "I have a terrible headache."

"Why don't you go lay down?" I suggested.

"No, I need to look through… Ahh! Dammit. Just give me a few minutes for my eyes to clear up a little."

He leaned back and rubbed at his neck and muttered to himself about how bad it hurt.

"Want me to wake the doctor?" I asked. She, along with the rest of the crew, were asleep at that time.

"No." he mumbled. "I'll be okay. Maybe I'll take an analgesic in a moment, but I'll be fine."

"I really think you should wake the doctor, Captain." Chief Preston said.

"I'll be fine in a moment!" Colton snapped. "Just leave me alone!"

I held my hand up for Preston to back off, and I let Colton do as he wanted. He leaned back in the chair and started bouncing his leg up and down.

"It looks to me like the best location for us to land is going to be about twenty degrees above the equator." I told Kre.

"Commander Xiang is going to be the one landing thi–"

Ensign Kre stopped talking and stared directly at Colton. I

turned toward him then as well. His leg had stopped bouncing, and was now laying limp at an odd angle. There was foam and vomit on his chin.

"Colton?" I said. I reached over and touched his leg. "Ensign Switzer?"

"Should I get the doctor, Ma'am?" Preston asked.

"Yes." I told her. "Colton!"

I stood over him and shook him lightly. He wasn't moving. As I shook, his leg flopped to the side and just stayed there. His arms were laying limp over the arms of the chair now, too.

He wasn't breathing.

"Colton!" I screamed.

Dr. Gershawn hurried in, still sporting her pajamas. She had us lower Colton to the floor, and she started checking him over. It took only a moment for her to stop and look up at me.

"How long has he been like this?" she asked.

"He was just talking to us half an hour ago." Kre said.

"Is he going to be alright?" Chief Preston asked.

I already knew the answer. He wasn't breathing. Hadn't *been* breathing for quite a while. If there were even a remote chance of saving him, Dr. Gershawn would have already been doing it.

Before long the rest of the crew were out with us, looking upon Colton's dead body. Dr. Gershawn said something to me then, but I can't remember it. I remember the gist of it being that it wasn't my fault.

How could it not be?

How could any of this not be my fault?

All I remember after that is that we moved Colton's body into the cargo hold. Everyone was in total shock. It was like all those other deaths were expected, but this one was the last straw.

Where does that saying even come from, anyway?

Maybe now I'll never know. There's nobody left now to ask who would know, anyway.

What I do know is that everyone kept asking me questions.

"Captain, what do we do with the body?"
"Captain, what do we do now?"
"Is this going to change things now, Captain?"

I was so sick of being called that. It hurt so much when they called me captain. All I had ever done was try to get to that point, but I had gotten there and had ruined it. Not just my chance, but everyone's lives.

"Do you want to take your shift, Captain?" Bao asked. "I can cover for you, if you want?"
"I'll do it." I mumbled back to her.

I remember it was really quiet that evening. I remember Anna trying several times to engage me in conversation, but I was unable to participate.

I was going to get her killed.

That's what I was thinking. I had gotten everyone on the Freedom killed, and now I was going to get the rest of them killed.

"I'm ready to take over, Captain." Bao said.
"Don't call me that!" I snapped.
"Callie," Anna said, putting her hand on my shoulder.
"Don't! Colton is dead because of me! Everyone is dead on Freedom because of me!"
"Kiddo, you aren't responsible for any of that." Bao argued.
"Yes I am. I am! I should have noticed what was coming for us. And I should have insisted that Colton talk to the doctor."
"Dr. Gershawn herself said it wouldn't have mattered, Callie." Anna told me.
"It might have! She isn't even completely sure what happened."

Dr. Gershawn told me that it was probably a burst aneurysm, but she couldn't be sure. She would be able to do an autopsy on Colton.

"I just… you take over, Bao. I'm not captain material."

"Callie, that's all you've ever wanted!" Anna complained.

"No," I shook my head. "I can't be. I… I'm not… smart enough, or good enough, or… something."

"You are the best option, kiddo." Bao told me. "I decline your offer, Captain."

"I can't…"

"You're our best hope now. We need you to get us through this, so keep it together."

She had a point. I needed to keep it together. Not that I was the best hope, just that it was not the time to sow the seed of doubt in their minds. That could wait until we landed. Until then it was mostly in Bao's hands, anyway.

I tried very hard to be more perky, to keep spirits up for the sake of the crew, but it was not working. I felt cold inside, and even Anna could not break through. I was lost inside my own head.

--

Near the beginning of my last shift at the helm I spent several minutes staring out the port, imagining my parents were out there somewhere. I waited for them to come into view through the port, promising that I'd be better, that I'd be a good girl for them if they would just come back to me. I promised God I would be good forever if he could just bring them back to me.

But they didn't come back, and the sixteen year old Callie knew they would not. But for just a few moments the five year old Callie inside of me really believed they would.

We began to get stronger readings from the moon's magnetic field around nineteen hundred that evening. We settled into an orbit by twenty one hundred, me still at the helm. I was so scared to pilot us to that point, afraid I'd screw it up somehow, but Bao was there at my side at guided me in what to do to bring us into a stable orbit. She said it would be a good learning experience.

Why I needed to learn was beyond me, honestly. I just wondered why she had me do it. When would I ever have the opportunity to put that experience to use?.

We scanned for a landing spot that would suit our needs. We

weren't having a lot of luck. We made two orbits, which was more than planned for, and were already well into Bao's shift–nearing oh two hundred–when the alarms started going off everywhere.

"What's going on, Commander?" I asked quickly. She was looking down at the gauges and just shrugged. "That's not the answer I wanted, Bao!"

"Sorry kiddo, it's all I have."

The entire crew were awake, of course. I had asked them to be in their seats, ready for our landing. I wanted them ready in case we needed any of them. Not that there was a lot they would be able to do, really, but it was always better to have everyone set and ready, I believed.

"We're losing fuel." Bao said, alarmed. "Dammit! Lazy Goddess Aergia! Captain, we need to land. Now! No, ten minutes ago."

"Take us in, Bao."

"This may get bumpy. I need you in the second seat, kiddo." she said.

"No, Chief Kouri is better at–"

"Instruments are screwed now," she said. "I need your eyes and your intuition."

"Commander, I just think–"

"Your call Captain, but I'd really rather live." she said.

Kouri was already out of his seat, already buckling into a seat in the back, before Bao had finished speaking.

I took the seat, though there was really no point in it, I thought. What could I do? Kouri had eyes, he could see out the port if it came to it. And, as much as I knew systems, Kouri was more familiar with the sensors on the Thumper. But Bao wanted me there, so I'd go. It was the least I could do, since it was all my fault that we had to do it in the first place.

"Buckle up, gang, this is going to be quite the ride." Bao said.

She hit the kickers to move us into the moon's atmosphere, and in a short time we began our atmospheric injection.

"Uh-oh." Bao said. "Shit."

"What uh-oh?" I asked.

"Oh… nothing." she mumbled. "No point worrying now."

“Bao,”

“I think we lost a drag chute, Captain.”

“A… well… isn’t that important?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” She managed a nervous chuckle. “Don’t worry too much, kiddo. We have a backup. Plus, I added that just to make sure we could get down to a decent speed to set her down. We won’t be needing it until we’re well past this… hell.”

The ports glowed a pink glow for a moment, then there was a bright flash as gas ionized, and then burning orange and white of the plasma glowing. I couldn’t look at it directly, it hurt my eyes.

“I did dozens of simulations,” Bao said, panting. “It was never like this.”

“You can do it.” I said.

“Sure.”

And she did. It was not smooth, and it was not comfortable, but we got into the atmosphere and slowed to a point that we could actually hope for a safe landing.

Hope.

What a dangerous thing.

The nose of Thumper pitched forward, and I could see land. Sort of. It was dark–or nearly–in the area we entered. In the low light I could just make out the ground beneath us.

“Altitude?” I asked.

“Hell if I know.” Bao answered. “No instrumentation, kiddo.”

“What do we need to do next, Bao?”

“Land. Quickly. I have no clue how much fuel we have, but this ship was not meant to fly in an atmosphere.”

“Meaning?”

“No wings, for one.” she said. “We’re a falling rock, basically. I’ve deployed the backup chute to slow us, but we’re going way too fast to land and make it out alive, even still. I don’t want to use thrusters to slow us until I absolutely have to, Captain. Unless we find a clear landing spot, we’re probably not surviving anyway.”

“Good to know. Hey, at least we won’t have to worry about building a shelter, then.”

“Glad you think so.” she said. “Smartass.”

I scanned over the horizon, trying my best to find a place quickly. It was taking a very long time. We actually came in over an ocean of some sort, not the ground as I had initially thought, and landing there was not an option. There were no boats aboard, and I didn't know how to swim, and I didn't think most of my crew did either. Swimming wasn't exactly usual on Freedom. We had a small pool, but it was shallow enough that most people could stand in it. Most of us never learned to swim.

The light turned slightly brighter as we went on, nearing ten minutes since entry. I could make out shapes of land. Mountains. We were still very high up, but not so high that I couldn't start to see details. In the distance to the left I could see light glinting, probably off of the reflective surface of water, I assumed. I made a note of that, thinking it may be necessary to locate that lake or pond if we couldn't find fresh water nearer to where we landed.

"Running out of time fast." Bao said. "See anything?"

"I think… trees? Are those trees?" I asked.

"They aren't lemon grass."

"But they're flame red, Bao. I never heard of trees–"

"Maybe it's autumn here." I heard Shauna say behind me. I had forgotten they were listening as well.

"Maybe." I agreed. "But they look… lively and well, and… I mean… Is that a grassy area?" I asked Bao. "It's red as well."

"Is it big enough to land in?" Bao asked. "If not, I really don't care, kiddo. We gotta put down in about a minute or we're never going to."

My eyes scanned over the area. We were well past the mountains by this point. There was a vast forest, and amid that forest I thought I saw a stream. Or river. We had to have been only a couple of kilometers up by that point. I ran through my thoughts, trying to figure out what I knew of topography of Earth. This wasn't Earth, but…

"Turn right." I told Bao.

"What? Oh. What did you see?" she asked, already putting my order into motion.

"Nothing yet. Just… a feeling."

"*That* is why I needed you in that seat."

Only a few miles ahead of us I could see what appeared to be a clearing. It was pretty big. From up that high the dirt had a greyish

purple tint to it, and I wondered what the mineral makeup of it was.

"We aren't going to make it." Bao said. "We're losing altitude too fast. We're not going to clear the trees."

"Can't we hit the thrusters to–"

"Yeah, and use the last of our fuel." she said. "At which point we won't have enough to slow us down."

"We come in too fast or we come down too soon?" I asked.

"Pretty much."

"Can't you deploy the secondary drag parachute?" Kouri asked from behind us.

"That was the secondary that we used." Bao told him.

"Oh, right." Kouri said.

"If we hit too fast we're not going to make it." Kre added, ever so helpfully.

"There!" I said, pointing. "Can you hit that hole?"

"You have got to be kidding me?!" Bao asked. "We're way off angle for that."

"Use the fuel to bank us that way, slide along the water in that stream to slow us, and we should come to rest in the clearing."

"Callie… I…" Bao sighed, but was already turning the craft. "It has been an honor to serve with all of you." she said. "And if we don't make it, kiddo, it has been a pleasure to serve under you."

The thrusters sputtered as she lined us up. Then they stopped altogether. Bao glanced at me, then pulled her hands back from the controls. We were completely ballistic then.

The shuttle was aiming downward at a high rate of speed, directly at the thing that I had assumed was a stream. I had thought that because it was reflecting the orange of the sky, but the closer we got the more red it seemed, and I started to doubt that it was actually water.

We were nearing the treeline when I decided that it truly was water, as I had thought. And then we impacted it. Thumper jarred, hard, and I could hear cargo from below crashing toward the front of the bay, and I could feel the belts holding my body to the seat as I was thrust forward.

I heard Svetlana cry out, and I spun my head to see that she was still buckled in. She was crying, hard, but so were several others in my shuttle.

As my eyes turned back to the front, I saw and felt that we had skipped on the water, was still skipping on the water, and had turned some to the port side. There was steam billowing from around us, and I could hear rocks and dirt and tree branches impacting the outside of our craft. There was a hard jolt, jarring me all the way to the bone, and I realized the side of our shuttle had dug into the bank of the stream then, and we pitched even further to that side.

The shuttled rolled up on its side, and I was sure we were going over, but Thumper righted itself as it slid along. And along. And along. It was infinite. I could still see debris floating in a cloud around the ports, all of it dinging off the side as we rushed into it. There was an awful smell of something burning, and I was sure we were on fire and would all die a horrible death.

I could feel us still bouncing off logs and rocks, bouncing along on the grey angry dirt.

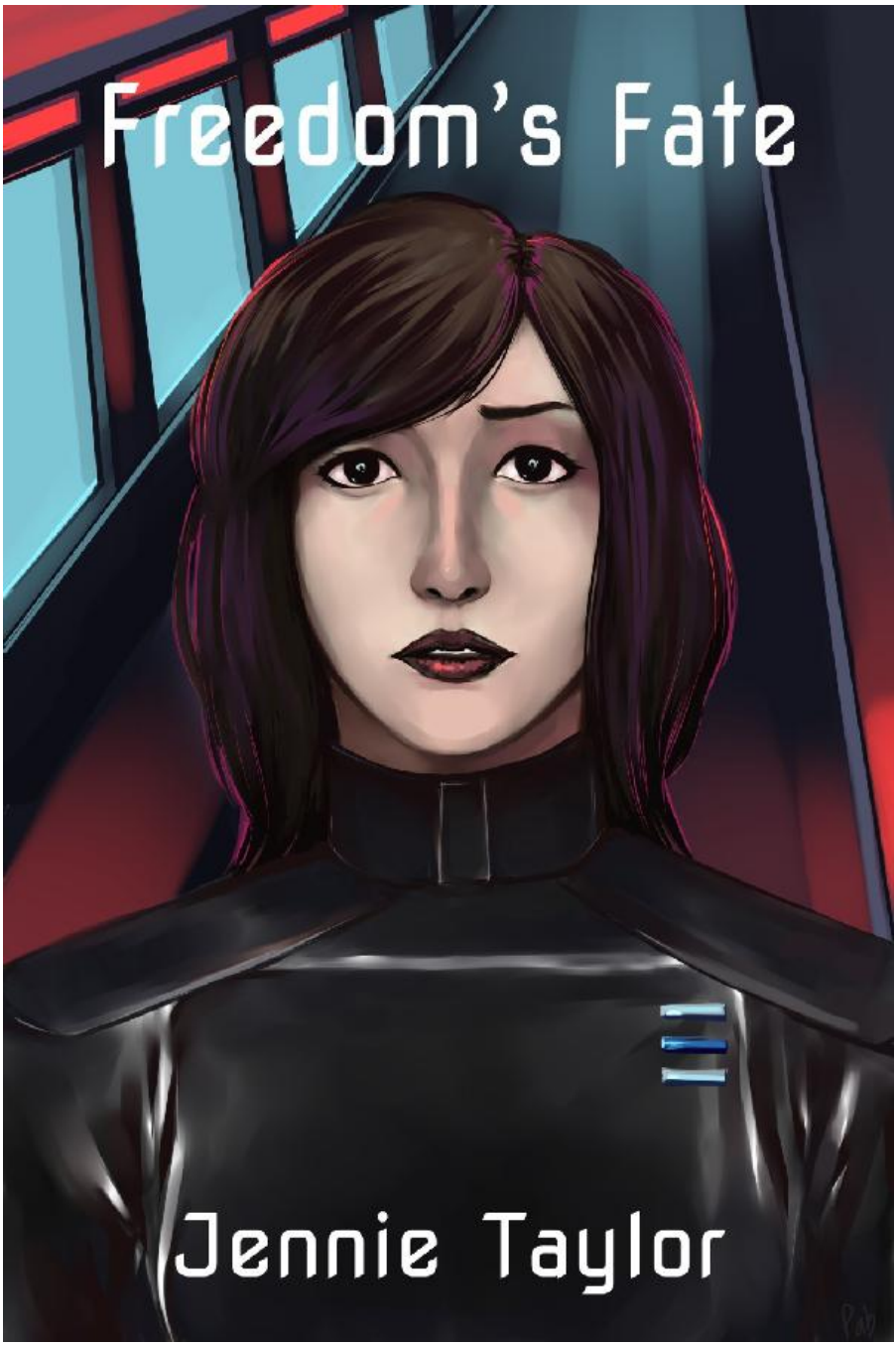
And then we came to a stop.

Around us billowed a massive cloud of red and grey dust, still falling upon the ports.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Bao said, her voice shaking. “Welcome home.”

**The End**

Thank you for reading *Faerie Queen*. If you enjoyed this book, please post a review on amazon, recommend it on twitter, or review it on your favorite social media site.



## About the Author

Jennie Taylor grew up in a small rural town, always dreaming of being a writer. She enjoys listening to music, writing, and spending time with her lovely wife. While she's not enjoying her creative pursuits, she can be found watching Korean dramas or playing vintage video games. Look for more novels coming soon!

contact Jennie at jennie@jenniert.com

check the author site at jenniert.com

If you liked this book, please let others know by leaving a review.

Other novels by Jennie Taylor:

Becca
Brynne, Non-Vampire
Betrayal
Faerie Queen